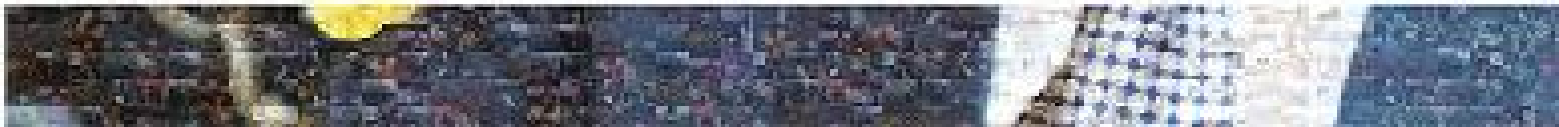
KASHMIR'S
THIN RED LINES

Dr Syed Shujaat Bukhari | Dr Tahmeena Bukhari



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Dedicated to

Dr Syed Shujaat Bukhari whose work will continue to inspire us all.

FOREWORD

Shujaat Bukhari, the noted journalist and policy analyst, was founder-editor of *Rising Kashmir*, one of Kashmir's two chief English language dailies. This fine compilation of articles is published after his tragic and untimely death.

We are fortunate that Shujaat was a prolific writer, of both chronicle and opinion, so that this collection could be published. Covering the years from 2013 to 2018, the book is divided into six sections: dialogue, India and its neighbours, Pakistan, Kashmir, killings and AFSPA, and local politics. Together, these six sections cover the key issues that dominated one of the grimmest periods in Kashmir's conflict-ridden history.

It is fitting that the book begins with a section on dialogue, an issue to which Shujaat returned time and time again, as an ardent advocate and frequent practitioner of peaceful negotiations to end the conflict in Kashmir. The opening article and those that follow reveal Shujaat's rare quality of tempering humanism with realism, as well as his incisive knowledge of India and Pakistan and their battle over Kashmir. While pushing for talks, he believed that a single track between the Government of India and dissidents such as the Hurriyat Conference would not succeed until there was some rapprochement between the Governments of India and Pakistan. Thus, the book opens counter-intuitively, with advice against talks between the Government of India and the Hurriyat alone.

The bulk of articles in the first three sections focus on the rocky seesaw of India-Pakistan relations. Covering elections in India and Pakistan, with new and very different sets of leaders emerging, his articles detail repeated if short-lived hopes of every engagement between the two countries, in search of peace for Jammu and Kashmir. They make for sad reading, because they show that the two countries took immense confidence-building steps together, but each time were abruptly halted by militant attacks, religious nationalism and internal dissension. Gradually, Shujaat came to believe that confidence-building measures with the Pakistani army were the most critical game changers, even if they might be pro forma ('DGsMO meet on December 24, 2013').

Section two adds further insights into the changing dynamic of India-Pakistan relations due to the impact of the war in Afghanistan, US plans for withdrawal and the emergence of a Russia-China bloc, along with China's Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Mentioning China's cautious support for calls to declare Gilgit-Baltistan Pakistan's fifth province, Shujaat underlined Pakistan's dilemma that such a declaration would weaken the latter's case on Kashmir ('GB, Kashmir and Pakistan', February 2015).

China's impact is a factor he returned to in later articles, pointing out that China, due to its significant and growing investments in Pakistan through CPEC, would continue to block India's efforts at the UN to get the leaders, organizations and affiliates of Lashkar e Taiba and Jaish e Mohammad declared terrorist ('June: Month of death and killings', 2017). Post-Pulwama developments bear out the truth of this prophesy.

The sharpest of his observations bear on Kashmir, as is to be expected. Tracing the renewal of militancy and public support for it – which he dated from 2008 and the ensuing vacuum in the India-Pakistan peace process following the 26/11 Mumbai attacks – Shujaat warned that Burhan Wani 'redefined the militancy in Kashmir and brought back its indigenous colour' ('Kashmir Funerals – Writing on the wall', 'Renewed support to militancy', March 2016). If 2010 and 2016 were compared, he added, it should be noted that public support for militants had grown exponentially. 'Unlike 2010, when murmurs about people's concern over continuous closure of educational institutions and the businesses were heard only after two weeks, this time Kashmir is silent over the future of students' ('Curfewed Kashmir', August 2016).

Pakistan, he said, 'may be the biggest promoter of violence in Kashmir', but the Government of India should also look inwards. Steps such as hanging of Afzal Guru, the demand for rollback of Article 370, the failure of the BJP-PDP coalition government, a new hardline approach to protest, rumors of separate townships for Kashmiri Pandits and Sainik colonies, had each contributed to public anger in the Valley, as had the rise in attacks on Muslims and Kashmiris after the BJP took power ('New phase of insecurity in Kashmir', June 2016). Over a year earlier, in February 2015, he had predicted that the BJP-PDP alliance of 2014, which put a coalition government in place, constituted a far greater gamble for the PDP than the

BJP. The PDP risked being decimated if the coalition failed, whereas its failure could strengthen the BJP in its core constituency since the BJP could claim they had tried but their partner's 'Muslim' intransigence doomed the alliance.

Yet, when Prime Minister Modi made conciliatory remarks to a delegation of opposition parties from Jammu and Kashmir led by former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, saying that 'the killing of "youth and security personnel"' brought distress to the people of India and called Kashmiris "part of us, our nation", Shujaat was amongst the first to seek a ray of hope in these words. 'Not much may change with this development but time has not been lost if realization is kept in mind and a forward movement is pushed without any conditions', he said (Ibid).

As a Kashmiri positioned, inevitably, between India and Pakistan, Shujaat brought a unique perception of the latter country and its people, an asset that few policymakers in India paid sufficient attention to. His masterful dissection of Nawaz Sharif's speeches on Pakistan's Kashmir Solidarity Day, in 2014, 2015 and 2016, provide an illuminating view of the internal political vicissitudes that Sharif faced both in relation to the Pakistan' army and to India.

This positioning between India and Pakistan, however, also plunged him into a prolonged and agonizing tussle between realism and hope, which is reflected throughout this book. Discussing the surgical strikes at Uri, Shujaat pointed out that they were followed by de-escalation largely due to pressure by the international community. 'India and Pakistan may de-escalate for their own compulsions', he commented, 'but Kashmir remains unattended and is an open wound that would continue to give pain to its people' ('Kashmir's wails lost in war cry', October 2016).

For many readers, such as myself, the most poignant of the articles in this collection are those that deal with the changing approach of the Government of India, led by the BJP, towards Kashmiris. New Delhi 'continues to be in a denial mode' Shujaat remarked sadly. The 'killing of 90 civilians at the hands of police and paramilitary forces and injuries to over 11,000 has been accepted as a norm to contain protests that are political in nature and are directly linked to the political resolution of the problem. But with both the countries having locked horns over it, the

militant attacks have taken the centre-stage and what is happening on ground is now being defined with that as a reality' (Ibid).

Two and a half years after this article was written, his words ring as true as they did then. For the past five years, Kashmiris have been viewed primarily through the lens of terrorism. After Pulwama, Kashmiris who lived thousands of miles away and had nothing to do with any attacks anywhere, let alone in Pulwama, were beaten up by nationalist mobs. If this is what it means to be 'part of us, our nation', who would want to be?

Radha Kumar, March 25, 2019

DIALOGUE

General or Parliamentary elections (16th Lok Sabha) were held in India in nine phases from 7 April to 12 May 2014. With an average voter turnout of 66 percent, the BJP-led NDA won 282 seats out of 543, more than doubling its previous seat share which was 116 after previous elections. Some five months before the elections (in late 2013), there were talks about India-Pakistan dialogue making rounds in Kashmir.

Past one week, in mid November 2013, has seen lot of noise around the revival of dialogue from various quarters which are presumably in favour of breaking a deadlock that has been prevailing since 2008. But the talks about dialogue— from Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, head of moderate faction of Hurriyat Conference, to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief Saifuddin Soz— fail to answer one basic question: whether Government of India is keen to have a dialogue and with whom and on what conditions?

Another important question that merits an answer is whether the present United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is in a position to initiate a dialogue when the general elections in India are round the corner ?

Government of India has lost ample opportunities in the past, at least five years, to move forward on the track of dialogue. Instead of re-opening the dialogue with a section of separatist leadership, it virtually shut the doors on reconciliation and peace in Jammu and Kashmir, that too at a time when people were craving for a peaceful settlement of the issue and had supported the peace process. Past experiences have shown that New Delhi has dealt with Kashmir with contempt and the atmosphere of peace has been misconstrued as weakness and then projected as normalcy in the state. Especially after 2008 Amarnath land row, the level of insensitivity shown by Delhi towards the height of unrest has only added to frustration of the people. Those who were giving vent to their feelings were mowed down with bullets resulting in death of more than 200 people in three years. In 2010 alone 120 people, mostly youth, were killed in firing by Police and Central Reserve Police Force. In order to cool down the tempers and buy time to restore order in Kashmir, GoI replayed its game of pretending to be concerned about

Kashmir and announced a three-member panel of Interlocutors to talk to people and suggest solutions.

Though the panel was not mandated to address the larger political question, still they met more than 6000 people across the length and breadth of the state. People surely raised issues of governance, maladministration and human rights and sought answers to many questions. The panel submitted a report which was well within the contours of Indian constitution. But it met the same fate as of previous moves initiated by GoI. Ministry of Home Affairs, which appointed the Interlocutors, was discreet in disowning the report. Even the Interlocutors, who submitted the report suggesting certain measures including the release of prisoners and other administrative measures, are now biting the dust and apparently repenting over the decision of being part of a sham exercise. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's repeated noise over revocation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has also come to an end after he was virtually snubbed by Army on many occasions inside the confidential briefing rooms and outside. He could not garner any support from the political system as well. It is a different issue that his government has blatantly misused the Public Safety Act (PSA) which is now proving more draconian then AFSPA.

In this backdrop the talk about dialogue looks out of place. For any serious political engagement creating a conducive atmosphere is a pre-requisite. For that, ground work takes a long time. Any engagement can prove productive when there is mutual trust and confidence on both sides. Above all people's mandate is must to take it to logical conclusion. At this stage both sides, keen in sending feelers about a dialogue, are lacking trust and confidence of the people. UPA government headed by Manmohan Singh is at its fag end with elections due in next five months. So what can it offer to Kashmiri leadership and who can sustain it? First of all the government has not shown any intent to offer a dialogue and the spent force of Track-II is fantasizing with the idea only to remain relevant in the circle. Even if the government is keen to re-open the dialogue, what are the terms and conditions? For any engagement any government in Delhi needs to build a national consensus the way former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee did, and was to some extent carried forward by Manmohan Singh. But today two main parties Congress and BJP are at logger heads over all important issues, though Kashmir is no issue for them.

For any successful move in this direction, the Pakistani angle cannot be ignored. Better relations between India and Pakistan are must for pushing even the dialogue between New Delhi and Srinagar. We have seen the reaction to Pakistan's Foreign Policy Adviser Sartaj Aziz's meetings with separatist leadership. BJP, the usual critic, has come down heavily on UPA government for allowing such type of meetings, though they ignore the fact that the larger space for such meetings was given by the government headed by the party from 1999-2004. Triangular approach is must to see a successful dialogue process on Kashmir and no party can be ignored.

Back home, Hurriyat (M) is also fiddling with fire. In the absence of a credible approach, it is futile to engage with New Delhi. I have all along advocated a step-by-step peaceful approach to address the political issue of Jammu and Kashmir. Violence from either side has no place in the game of resolution. But to talk about a dialogue without any substantial step to win the confidence and trust of people is to go against the dominant political sentiment. What are the guarantees for Mirwaiz Farooq to agree to hold dialogue? There is virtually no authority in Delhi, in the wake of fast approaching general elections, to offer a credible and trustworthy dialogue which could only come with concrete steps to mitigate the sufferings of people and addressing their political aspirations. Mirwaiz and his group do not enjoy confidence of people at this stage to enter into any dialogue. If he is enamoured by a spent force of Track-II, he is wrong in his approach. Let the Indian electorate chose a new government and let us wait for its policy on Kashmir, then only one can weigh the option of a dialogue. Till then it is purely a futile exercise.

DGsMO meet on Dec 24, 2013

On September 29, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif agreed on a meeting between the DGsMO when they held talks on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York.

Indian army sources said the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGsMO) of India and Pakistan met on December 24 at the Wagah border to discuss ways to strengthen the ceasefire at the Line of Control (LoC).

Text of India-Pakistan DGsMO Meeting Joint Statement:

1. *The DGsMO level meeting between Pakistan Army and Indian Army o the issues related to Line of Control was held at Wagah on 24 Decembe 2013. The Pakistan delegation was headed by Major General Aame Riaz, Director General Military Operations, Pakistan Army. The India delegation was headed by Lieutenant General Vinod Bhatia, Directo General Military Operations, Indian Army.*

2. *The meeting was held in a cordial, positive and constructiv atmosphere. Both DGsMO showed their commitment to maintain th sanctity and ceasefire on the Line of Control and agreed to re-energiz the existing mechanisms. Consensus was developed to make Hotlin Contact between the two DGsMO more effective and result oriented. I was also decided to inform each other if any innocent civilia inadvertently crosses Line of Control, in order to ensure his / her earl return.*

3. *To carry forward the positive spirit of DGsMOs meeting, two fla meetings between Brigade Commanders will be held on the Line o Control in the near future, to ensure maintenance of peace an tranquility along the Line of Control.*

4. *Both sides reiterated resolve and commitment to continue efforts fo ensuring ceasefire, peace and tranquility on the Line of Control.*

Even if it may not be termed as a major breakthrough but the meeting between the Directors General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan has surely helped to break the deadlock. By having the first eye-to-eye contact after 14 years, the top level Army officers have not only pushed the battered relations on a new track, but also honoured the commitment of two Prime Ministers – Manmohan Singh and Nawaz Sharif – which they reached on the sidelines of UN General Assembly in New York three months back.

The contact that graduated from every- Tuesday hotline to the physical meeting at Wagah this Tuesday infuses a sense in the relations that have been marred by intense hostility on the Line of Control (LoC) throughout 2013. With this meeting, in which both sides agreed to honour the ceasefire, one can hope that in 2014 both India and Pakistan will usher into a phase of cordial relations. Giving details about the meeting, an Indian Army

spokesman termed it having been held in cordial, positive and constructive atmosphere. “Both DGsMO showed commitment to maintain sanctity and ceasefire on the LoC and agreed to re-energise the existing mechanisms,” he said, adding that two Brigadier-level flag meetings will be held in near future.

Besides this both sides have agreed to take some more positive steps to make the atmosphere conducive. The DGsMO meeting may not bring immediate changes in the relations but it has a strong potential to push for normalizing the situation along LoC.

The meeting between Singh and Sharif in New York was overshadowed by the twin attacks in Jammu a day before they were scheduled to sit and re-start the high level contact. Still they managed to meet though not with a positive body language.

The DGsMO meeting was the only take away from that meeting and its materialization is a positive move. The erstwhile “composite” dialogue, now named as “comprehensive” by certain quarters, has been in tatters since the terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008. Notwithstanding the fact that it was resumed at a certain level, there has not been a significant forward movement on dialogue. While Pakistan has been juggling with its own internal turmoil, India’s scam-ridden United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has been under a high dose of criticism for its multiple failures.

It is a fact that any government in Delhi has to take opposition into confidence while taking any step for a raproshma with Pakistan but the process in itself cannot be held hostage to such a “necessity” which is easy when a government is in trouble for other reasons.

For two years now the foreign ministers of the two countries have not met and the gains made on trade front when Commerce Secretaries met in September and the decisions on a liberal visa regime seem to have been wasted due to lack of political will to further the peace process.

India’s concerns over terrorism and more so on Mumbai trial are well understood and Pakistan’s cooperation is must to build a level of confidence in bringing the culprits to justice. Islamabad must move forward in having speedy trial though the blame and counter blame about the evidence has been on. One thing is important to understand that while New Delhi has agreed to resume the process after Mumbai attacks, its progress should not become a bone of contention.

With a newly elected democratic government in power in Pakistan, in New Delhi it is now a wait-and-watch game till the general elections are over and a new regime assumes office. Sharif had begun his new term in office with the commitment` to peace with India. For the first few months he stressed on the need to “pick up threads from 1999 Lahore declaration” but ostensibly there was no positive response from Delhi. This was perhaps because of a crisis-ridden Manmohan Singh government coupled with New Delhi’s intransigent behaviour to not engage with Pakistan till the “last gun or bomb” is cleared of Indian soil.

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan has a role in the trouble in India, but it is also because of New Delhi’s own mishandling of the minority community which gives rise to “home grown terror” and is in turn being promoted by the extremists elsewhere. In addition to that the “Saffron terror” has also become a reality within India.

So to hold everything hostage to the results of Mumbai attacks trial may not be prudent on part of India which has a bigger responsibility in contributing to peace in the South Asian region.

While Nawaz Sharif is struggling to assert to have larger role to civilian authority, his “intentions” except for his reported statement about “fourth war”, which his office eventually denied, have to be taken at face value. If those associated with peace process during Musharraf era are to be believed, the four-point formula on Kashmir also could not be implemented before his ouster “only due to delay in response from Delhi for a considerable time”.

In past few months, Sharif seems to be succeeding in his effort to give civilian color to his rule and the smooth change of guard in Army has shown that he is in command. This means that New Delhi should not lose this opportunity as well. In case Sharif fails himself, the onus will be on him. But it is in the interest of New Delhi that a serious engagement is on track to move forward on ensuring a sustainable peace process.

While the wait for a new government is unavoidable the process of building more bridges like the meeting between DGMOs must continue on both sides. This will serve as ground work for a larger process after May. Whosoever comes to power in Delhi, peace with Pakistan to eventually find a dignified solution to all problems including Kashmir is inevitable. Solutions are more in the interest of India than Pakistan .

Foreign secretary-level bilateral talks called off by New Delhi on August 28, 2014

India on August 18, 2014 called off foreign secretary-level bilateral talks with Pakistan over criticism of Pakistani High Commissioner Abdul Basit meeting with Hurriyat leader Shabir Shah.

"At a time when serious initiatives have been taken by the government of India, the invitation to Hurriyat leaders raises question on Pakistan's intention. Foreign Secretary Sujatha Singh's visit to Pakistan on August 25 stands cancelled," the ministry's spokesperson Syed Akbaruddin said.

After New Delhi unilaterally called off the Foreign Secretary-level talks with Islamabad, following the meeting of Hurriyat leaders with Pakistan High Commissioner Abdul Basit, the cross-border shelling has again started with a bang. Few more lives have been lost and if seen technically, the 2003 ceasefire along the borders has virtually come to an end.

New Delhi's move to call off the talks is seen as an attempt to send a terse message to both Pakistan and the Kashmiri separatists. The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) led government in Delhi has surely started "fulfilling" its electoral promises and this surprising move seems to be the beginning of a new rather tough bilateral journey. "Terror and talks cannot go hand in hand," Prime Minister Narendra Modi had repeatedly said during the election campaign. But he had himself given a pleasant surprise when he invited all heads of the SAARC countries including Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony. Diplomatic circles were taken aback as it was something quite unexpected of the tough-talking Modi. If the insiders are to be believed New Delhi was keen to see Nawaz Sharif being part of the grand swearing in ceremony but it could be covered up under the larger outreach to all SAARC nations.

It was during the brief meeting between Modi and Nawaz the decision to hold the Foreign Secretary-level talks was taken. And the expectations were raised for a wider scope to formally renew the dialogue process between the two sides. It had raised hopes that both leaders could meet in New York in September on the sidelines of UN General Assembly.

It is very difficult to read the mind of the new government in Delhi. Even senior journalists and analysts in Delhi fail to assess any critical issue including that of foreign affairs. But will the tough line the new government

has taken bear any fruit for lasting peace in the region. The reason New Delhi gave for calling off the talks was also not provocative enough to take an extreme step to say categorical no to engagement with Pakistan. In the past over six years including these three months of Modi government, Government of India's major concerns vis-a-vis Pakistan and the dialogue have remained confined to issues related to terrorism, Mumbai trial and Hafiz Saeed et al. Whatever the progress on Mumbai and other issues, New Delhi had still shown willingness to engage with Pakistan.

The timing of this extreme step is also something one cannot easily ignore. Pakistan has been grappling with more than one challenge to save the country from complete destabilization. From terrorism shaking its foundations to the new calls for reformation targeted at Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan has been going through one of the toughest tests in the recent past. Prime Minister Modi told Nawaz during his meeting in Delhi that his country should put break on aiding and abetting terrorism, but three months was too less a time to see the results. And the reason to call off the talks as admitted by keen watchers of India and Pakistan affairs was not tenable. Pakistani leaders and envoys have been meeting Hurriyat leaders since 1994 and it has not changed the dynamics of the political engagement either between India or Pakistan or Delhi and Srinagar. The meetings between Hurriyat leaders and the Pakistani High Commissioner were publicized much in advance. If at all GoI had objection to these interactions they could have barred them from flying down to Delhi. Putting them under house arrest is a routine in Srinagar. It is interesting to note that Syed Ali Geelani, the octogenarian separatist leader has been under house arrest for over six months now and he was not allowed to offer a single congregational prayer on Friday. But he was not stopped from flying to Delhi. This uncovers the intentions of government to let these meetings happen and then use them for calling off the FS level talks. In case Delhi would have stressed on terrorism, cross-border skirmishes and the prolonged delay in Mumbai trial, one could understand the essence of the decision to call off the talks and take the situation back to era of hostility.

Many analysts are linking the decision to the forthcoming assembly elections in four states of India. Since BJP took a tough line during the election campaign for Lok Sabha elections, it will have to show the results on ground. The four states including Jammu and Kashmir that are going to polls by the end of the year have already started witnessing heated campaigns

revolving the issues related to borders and Pakistan. This is surely going to help the BJP to polarize the voters and get the lion's share. The lines are clearly drawn particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. Since BJP bagged two seats in Jammu in parliamentary elections they are now eyeing on most of the assembly segments. BJP president Amit Shah's warning to Pakistan on Monday that in case shelling continues the forces will give befitting reply also indicates how the party is going to up the ante on this front.

With the tension escalating on borders, the brunt of this renewed hostility will have to be borne by the people who live along the borders. What all stakeholders fail to realize is the fact that the ceasefire announced in 2003 and followed up with more Confidence Building Measures on both sides of Jammu and Kashmir had yielded dividends for the general public. This bonhomie from 2003 to 2008 might have upset the hawks and vested interests on both sides, but it had done wonders on re-engagement of people across Line of Control and giving relief to lakhs of people living on the borders. Their lives had dramatically changed and they could live in peace after more than a decade.

While Pakistan needs to change its policy and not take any step that is provocative, the government led by Modi in Delhi also has to work for bringing peace to the region. Unlike Vajpayee who did not enjoy majority for his party, Modi is strong and can over-rule any other leader. He has more advantages on delivering better than what Vajpayee did. In case Modi stops flexing muscle and starts peace mission, he will be remembered more than Vajpayee, who had earned goodwill in both Kashmir and Pakistan for his statesmanship, vision and delivering something different than in the last 60 years. Votes will come and go but the lives lost in the wake of tension will not come back and will further the distances.

India-Pak trade Conference, 2015

A two-day conference in Delhi on "Enhancing India-Pakistan trade" laid bare some critical issues that have been holding the two countries from moving forward in making it a real flourishing dividend of political diplomacy. Amid an unusual lull on the security front and a stalled dialogue progress, the Delhi-based think tank, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), pushed through its third conference on the subject. Business leaders on both sides could not hide their

passion and urge to push for a strong case to make the trade between India and Pakistan hassle free. Problems ranging from smaller hiccups in visas to communication were highlights of the areas that need to be addressed. The trade between India and Pakistan has crossed over 2 billion dollars but when compared to India-China trade, it is at dismal low. Notwithstanding this fact, the level of tension between New Delhi and Beijing has not shown much of an improvement.

However, in case of India-Pakistan trade, the participants, though not all of them were from business community, agreed that conducive political and security environment is must for the desired goal of a successful trade regime. A tough bureaucratic setup on both sides is considered to be a stumbling block. But the fact that most of the stakeholders agree is that a strong political leadership could override the set mind of the bureaucracy. Apart from the political setup, the media too plays a spoilsport as has been seen in past few years.

While the India-Pakistan bonhomie survived because of the progress on softer issues such as trade and culture, but it has not been beneficial in carrying forward the process. Many panelists argued that the security environment has lot to do with this deadlock. It is very difficult to understand where exactly the thought process takes a beating vis-a-vis creating a conducive atmosphere on both sides. On the face of it both countries know that war is not a solution but then why peace can be so elusive?

With the BJP-led government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi almost shutting the door on reconciliation and peace building, it has led to Pakistan hardening its stand too. There is no denying the fact that Pakistan's "half-hearted" response in what New Delhi believes to be "tackling terrorism" has not yielded much, but would that mean that there will be no rapprochement? How long the people on both sides, especially in Jammu and Kashmir will bear the brunt of this hostility? Softer issues like trade raise enormous stakes among those who are associated with it, thus creating a space for an environment of co-existence. But when there is a stalemate, it forces even a top envoy like Pakistan's High Commissioner in Delhi, Abdul Basit to say that "softer issues have not helped" to approach the harder issues. In this conference, Basit argued that trade had increased manifold in last one decade, despite many bottlenecks – "but has it helped to open up space on addressing an issue like Jammu and Kashmir". "Instead BJP

government has hardened its position and it unilaterally cancelled the Foreign Secretary-level talks in August last year" he said. Thus he declared that Kashmir issue has to be addressed first and then the rest.

So the situation is back to square one. If the softer issues cannot lead to opening for at least some consideration to touch harder issues, what is in store for the people in near future is difficult to think of. In the same conference, former Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha maintained that bureaucracy has to be kept out of the relationships "then only both countries can progress". That is true to an extent, but ultimately it is the political will of the leadership that is decisive. What we have seen during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure, him leading as prime minister and Sinha being part of that regime, was purely the will of the political leadership that changed the course. At the time when New Delhi boasts of over 70 percent turnout in assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the doors for both Pakistan and the separatists are closed. Past experiences tell us that this participation in electing the local government has not worked in isolation. Developmental agenda alone has not worked in Kashmir but the raproshma with Pakistan has contributed too as it has brought a remarkable turnaround in situation from 2003 to 2008 in the shape of cross-Line of Control Confidence Building Measures (CBMs). One has to understand the role of Pakistan and its military, and it alone cannot be neutralized by keeping the Army in attention on borders to respond with mortars and artillery guns.

What we saw in 2008 and 2010 in Kashmir was the result of a vacuum that was created after the peace process was stalled. With a single bullet having a potential to change the course in Kashmir, it offers a lesson to be learned that road to peace in the region goes from Kashmir and has potential to build an unbreakable bridge. Both the countries need to respect the sentiment of the business and other softer communities who could play an interface in the tense situations. For Modi it is a historical opportunity to follow the path laid out by Vajpayee. He has been reaffirming on and off that he would go by his line of "Insaniyat, Jamhooriyat and Kashmiriyat", but so far he does not seem to have come out of the strong pressure of registering the win in many state elections, which is unfortunately linked to his hard posturing vis-a-vis Pakistan. For many in India, Pakistan may be a rogue state but the country has to deal with its neighbour. Essentially in case of Kashmir, Pakistan has a

constituency both within and in Kashmir. It was not the case with Punjab where it supported militancy and once wiped out the chapter was closed.

Even as the harder issues, like Kashmir for Pakistan and terrorism for India, are hard pressing there is no route other than business that raises the stakes. Economy is not only the key to success but to compulsion. And it must be allowed to work as latter in respect of India-Pakistan relations. Governments on both sides must not budge before the discourses shaped up by the jingoistic media particularly the TV channels that are more concerned about TRP's than the peace and dignity of the people .

India-Pak CBMs

Both India and Pakistan are maintaining their stubborn stand over the resumption of a dialogue process that could help build a peaceful atmosphere in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's unilateral offer (that came after a unilateral decision to call off Foreign Secretary-level talks in July 2014) to send Foreign Secretary Jaishankar to Pakistan has also not helped achieve any headway in this regard. Except for the symbolic visit Jaishankar made in March as part of what Modi preferred to call "SAARC yatra", nothing tangible has been done to revive the relations.

Instead both New Delhi and Islamabad have hardened their stand vis-a-vis each other's activities which they believe are detrimental to the security of their countries. India's insistence that people such as Dawood Ibrahim were being sheltered in Pakistan, the "most wanted terrorist" Hafiz Saeed was roaming free and the constant "source of irritation" Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi, considered to be mastermind of 2008 Mumbai attacks was flirting with the justice system have put the situation back to the beaten path. Similarly Pakistan is openly accusing India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of fomenting trouble within its boundaries and this came directly from the Army establishment. While Modi completes one year in office on May 26, one of the foremost challenges remains wanting, which is having good relations with neighbours (read Pakistan).

Better relations between two countries is a pre-requisite to have any movement forward on Kashmir and past seven years have seen that any improvement within and outside Kashmir has remained hostage to the animosity India and Pakistan have been harbouring.

However, amid the dark clouds hovering over their relations a silver lining appeared recently in the form of some possible agreements on strengthening Confidence Building Measures across the Line of Control (LoC). Joint Secretary (Kashmir) in Ministry of Home Affairs revealed a positive development about the proposals to enhance the travel allowances for the passengers traveling on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakot routes besides on-spot clearance to children below five years of age.

At a time when both sides are struggling to show each other down in relations, this could be seen as a bonus for the CBMs that most of the people believe were dying a slow death. Notwithstanding the fact that the cumbersome procedures involved in clearances for the travel as also the lack of facilities for cross LoC trade have played a spoilsport for a desired progress in these CBMs, the figures about the use of bus service are surely encouraging.

Since the time bus service in Kashmir was launched – in April 2005 and June 2006 in Poonch – over 27000 people on both the sides of LoC have traveled by the bus. Those who use the bus service are the ones who belong to divided families and not even to the extended relations. Inspite of continued tension along the LoC and lack of commitment on both sides to upgrade this important CBM, a good number of people using it is surely an encouraging sign that needs not only to be promoted but also publicized to clear the negative impression people have about these CMBs.

In 2014, Kashmir Initiative Group (KIG), an intra-Kashmir peace building platform pitched for institutionalized CBMs. “While the CBMs have created a window of opportunity, they remain precarious. Cross-LoC CBMs can only be sustained and their peace building value realised if they are institutionalised. CBMs are meaningful when they reflect predictable, consistent and accountable behaviour,” reads a paper released by KIG.

Arguing that these CBMs have raised stakes for peace, the paper noted, when establishment of reliable procedures are understood and acted upon by all sides, then it could be said that there is a degree of institutionalization. Parties can then be more confident in building trust in each other and a virtuous, as opposed to vicious, cycle of behaviour can start to evolve.

“The cross-LoC bus and trade initiatives initiated in 2005 and 2008 respectively have been important for supporting the development of an environment conducive to conflict transformation. Many people on both

sides of the LoC have developed a vested interest in peace as a result. Cross-LoC travel opens opportunities for human contact; it connects families thereby addressing longstanding grievances, and trade creates an opportunity for people across the LoC to undertake joint activities that have a mutual and tangible (economic) benefit. However, both initiatives suffer from operational challenges, which limit their socioeconomic and peace building potential".

During his visit to Uri on May 16, Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed too underlined the importance of CBMs and vowed to take all steps to upgrade them. It was during his first tenure as Chief Minister in 2005, the CBMs were launched with much fanfare as part of his party's political agenda, though initiated by then Prime Minister A B Vajpayee and Pakistan president Parvez Musharraf. But in the following years, increased hostility diverted attention of the governments though they have not ceased to exist despite many lows. As the results have shown, these CBMs have strong potential to be strong agents of change; both India and Pakistan must understand the stakes they have raised in peace building which could help them pick up the threads for a sustained peace/dialogue process to build an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust.

Prime Ministers Meet at SCO summit, July 2015

Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Nawaz Sharif met at the annual Shanghai Cooperation Organisation on July 9, 2015. The leaders met during BRICS outreach dinner and exchanged pleasantries ahead of their scheduled meeting on July 10.

Text of Joint Statement Ufa (Russia) Meet The Prime Ministers of Pakistan and India met today on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in Ufa. The meeting was held in a cordial atmosphere. The two leaders exchanged views on issues of bilateral and regional interest .

They agreed that India and Pakistan have a collective responsibility to ensure peace and promote development. To do so, they are prepared to discuss all outstanding issues.

Both leaders condemned terrorism in all its forms and agreed to cooperate with each other to eliminate this menace from South Asia.

They also agreed on the following steps to be taken by the two sides:

1. *A meeting in New Delhi between the two NSAs to discuss all issue connected to terrorism.*

2. *Early meetings of DG BSF and DG Pakistan Rangers followed by tha of DGMOs.*

3. *Decision for release of fishermen in each other's custody, along wit their boats, within a period of 15 days.*

4. *Mechanism for facilitating religious tourism.*

5. *Both sides agreed to discuss ways and means to expedite the Mumba case trial, including additional information like providing voic samples.*

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reiterated his invitation to Prime Minister Modi to visit Pakistan for the SAARC Summit in 2016. Prime Minister Modi accepted the invitation.

The relations between India and Pakistan have always been complicated. Even if the two governments intend to move forward to find solution to the host of problems and differences they are facing, the process does not go without any question. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif met in Ufa (Russia) last week, it was surely a significant event in the battered relations of the two neighbouring countries. They not only met but also agreed to a joint statement.

However, there was a reaction in both the countries over this meeting though different in nature. While in India, Modi was questioned for his "flip-flop" policy vis-a-vis Pakistan, PM Sharif got brickbats for ostensibly ignoring Kashmir in the joint statement.

Majority of those who reacted sharply to why the K-word was given a miss believed that Sharif had compromised. In Pakistan that reaction from

opposition, notably from the extremists is on expected lines, as they would not want any space to be given to India as far as Kashmir is concerned.

But in case of Modi, he is confronted with a problem, which is of a serious nature. His policy and conduct vis-a-vis Pakistan in past over a year has come under severe criticism not only from the opposition Congress but also from those who closely watch the relations between the two countries.

Former ambassador K C Singh went to the extent of saying that in case of Nawaz Sharif there has been a consistency as far as India-Pak relations are concerned but that has not been the case with Modi. This "flip-flop" is not justified by quoting the May 31, 2015, statement of Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj when she maintained: "*As said earlier, our dialogue with Pakistan will only materialize in a peaceful milieu. This zone will be created only when Pakistan takes action against the (terror) perpetrators like Lakhvi and others.*" Now that Pakistan, according to India, has not taken any substantial step to bring people like Lakhvi to the book, how come the talks could be held in Ufa. The body language of two prime ministers as also the foreign secretaries, who read out a statement, was also a promising one. Political grapevine is that Sushma Sawraj is surely the Foreign Minister but the decision on foreign policy lies with Modi only and that is why this u-turn on government's official stand that came on Modi's completion of one year in office.

Leaving the debate that whether the foreign minister is part of the group that frames policy on Pakistan aside, the fact remains that there has been a flip-flop in Modi's handling. After Nawaz Sharif came to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Modi in May 2014, there seemed to be a beginning of a new chapter in relations though the brief meeting was overshadowed with conditions like curbing terrorism first.

However, when Modi government unilaterally called off the Foreign Secretary level talks in July 2014 on the pretext that the Pakistan High Commissioner in India, Abdul Basit, had met Hurriyat leaders and that was not acceptable, it too turned the clock back. This led to a fresh spate of violent incidents across the border and strong rather threatening statements seemed like becoming the new foreign policy doctrine on both sides. Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said on January 4, 2015 that India doesn't understand language of peace and threatened saying, "In the past six to seven months, we have tried to better our ties with India so that peace can

prevail. But it seems that they do not understand this language. I believe, we will now communicate with India in the language they understand."

Similarly, the junior information minister in India Rajvinder Singh Rathore hinted at similar action from New Delhi against Pakistan as in the case of Myanmar. Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar also talked about killing a terrorist by a terrorist which had more than one meaning.

But this abrupt change of heart in Modi surprised one and all. Though the meeting was on the sidelines of SCO in Ufa, Modi turned out to be positive in more than one way. He also accepted the invitation of Nawaz Sharif to attend the SAARC meeting in Pakistan scheduled next January, 2016. Agreement to have a meeting at the level of National Security Advisers followed by Directors General of Border Security Force and Rangers are some significant moves. Now that Modi has moved forward without pre-conditioning the dialogue with Hafiz Saeeds and Lakhvis, it remains to be seen whether he would stick to this at least for next six months so that his proposed visit to Islamabad is not jeopardized.

However, one thing is becoming clear that Modi does want to be different now vis-a-vis his role in South Asia as the leader of the largest country. Since he has been trying to send out the larger than life message about himself, the continued hostility with immediate neighbour does not help him to sustain that message.

It is an admitted fact now that the powers such as United States and European Union do not like the acrimonious relations between the two neighbours. Pakistan's National Security Adviser Sartaj Aziz had said in February that the telephone call, which Modi made to Nawaz Sharif that month, was due to "persuasion" by the US. It seems that Modi has realized that in case he wants to be seen as a "leader" in South Asia he will have to start from the beaten track wherever left by Atal Bihari Vajpayee who is still to be replaced as a passionate peacemaker in the region.

As far as the reaction to Pakistan "compromising" on Kashmir is concerned, that is not so significant if we look at the nature of relations the two countries have. Even breaking the ice to make an eye-to-eye contact is a challenge between the two hostile neighbours. It is well understood that contentious issues such as Kashmir can never be a beginning of a resumed dialogue process. That is probably the fact the Pakistan has realized. Surely there cannot be permanent peace without resolving Kashmir. But the process

needs to be initiated on the terms of mutual interests and the constituencies they address back home. Today the challenge is to resume a process and give way to sustained dialogue. That is why Sartaj Aziz talked about Kashmir through backchannel though he had to assert that no talks could be held without Kashmir. Both the governments' bigger challenge is how they could resist the pressure of their home constituencies which they have nurtured with rhetoric over a period of time. But the fact is that talks have begun and these must go on.

Ahead of NSAs meet on August 23, 2015

Engagement between India and Pakistan has always been enigmatic, but not as enigmatic as it is today. While both the countries are gearing up for the highest-level engagement on August 23, when National Security Advisers are scheduled to meet in Delhi, skirmishes on borders have led to a mini-war like situation. For the past over one week, armies on both sides have upped the ante, exchanged fire which left nearly six people dead.

Intermittent exchange of fire on the Line of Control and the International Border has become a frequent feature over the years, but the way the latest spate has gone out of control, it suggests a radical shift. Amid a usual diatribe of allegations and counter-allegations, both New Delhi and Islamabad have been calling for restraint and also threatening each other. On the ground, the armies seem not listening to the political leadership. This has not only led to loss of civilian lives, but also triggered migration along the borders, reminding us of a pre-2003 situation when both sides were about to go for a war.

However, the silver lining, one can see in this haze of disappointment is that New Delhi as well as Islamabad are sticking to their schedule of NSA-level meeting in Delhi on August 23. This meeting is a follow-up to joint declaration at Ufa (Russia) last month, which has raised the hopes of a renewed raproshma. Notwithstanding the fact that both countries have resolved to show each other down, this commitment to go ahead with the dialogue is encouraging. There is no alternative to dialogue and opening the frontiers for blazing fight has not solved any problem. It has rather added miseries to tens of thousands of people living along the LoC and IB and also choked the channels of communication. The stand-off has derailed the hope for a conducive atmosphere ahead of the talks.

The ceasefire worked well for a long time and its consequential benefits were seen on the ground. With tens of thousands of people living along the 725-kilometer-long LoC returning to their homes to live in peace after a long time, the reconciliation paved the way for grand reconciliation. This could be seen in the shape of historic moves of starting the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakot bus services, thus altering the status quo between the two parts of Kashmir. This not only created a space for making the situation conducive for furthering the talks, but also instilled a feeling among the people that the divided state had chances of getting united at least at the symbolic level. Besides bringing relief to people who had been caught in the shelling of two armies, these Confidence Building Measures were seen as godsend by the divided families, of whom many had not seen their dear and near ones for nearly six decades. The biggest beneficiaries were the people of state on both sides and of course the two countries which could save not only their face but also their resources to a larger extent .

The historic breakthrough, for which the foundations had been laid by the then Prime Minister A B Vajpayee and former Pakistan President Parvez Musharraf and later on carried forward in Dr Manmohan Singh's regime, was something very significant which the warring neighbours had achieved in last sixty years. This new phase of, if not friendship, but surely of normalcy in the relations had come in the backdrop of a near war-like situation between them in the wake of the parliament attack of 2001.

However, this could not carry on for varied reasons— one being the Mumbai attack in 2008 that completely derailed the process and then the continuous cycle of instability in Pakistan. Notwithstanding a hostile atmosphere prevailing on both sides, the peace process was at least breathing with the ceasefire being its benchmark. With Nawaz Sharif returning to power and his commitment to peace moves aiming at better relations with India, the hopes for an end to enmity had revived. Like Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi must be under pressure not to continue with this engagement, but this is the time to show that misadventures of hawks need to be neutralized by going ahead with dialogue.

This is the only way to move forward. It is encouraging to see the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party throwing its weight behind the PM though the party was always opposed to this kind of engagement with Pakistan when in opposition. State BJP leader Ashok Gupta told a news conference here on

Monday that talks should go ahead. “We have bigger aspirations and are trying to make Pakistan understand the dividends of peace,” he said adding, “Dialogue process with Pakistan is important to realize ambitious economic development of India.”

Today, it is a challenging situation for both New Delhi and Islamabad to deal with those who are against peace. Extremist elements on both sides are worried about their irrelevance in the wake of success of the dialogue between India and Pakistan. While the hawks in India are working overtime to derail such a process, the extremists in Pakistan may have more effective means (of violence) to discourage such a process. That is why it is important for the political leadership to assert and make such forces irrelevant. Another encouraging thing that has come up is that PM Modi is not repeating the mistake of calling the dialogue off, the way he did in August last year when Foreign Secretaries were scheduled to meet. The argument at that time was very weak and untenable. It is in the interest of people that both New Delhi and Islamabad show the grit and go ahead with the process. That only can silence the guns on borders, as stakes of peace lovers will automatically go up.

NSA-talks called off

NSA-talks that were scheduled on August 23, 2015 were called off a day before with India and Pakistan blaming each other for the cancellation.

Calling off a dialogue at the last moment seems to have become a permanent feature for the bruised relationship India and Pakistan have been enduring for last over six decades. Cancellation of National Security Adviser (NSA)-level talks on August 23 did not come as a surprise. The entire exercise turned out to be a drama carried out through media. Lack of seriousness and sincerity has become the hallmark for this “compulsive exercise” for both the countries. The way the talks were aborted, it again brought to the fore the harsh reality that New Delhi and Islamabad have lost the ground of trust and confidence with each other.

I was in Islamabad when these interesting rather dramatic developments were taking place. Journalists as usual were glued to TV screens when Pakistan’s NSA Sartaj Aziz addressed a live news conference taking exception to separatist leader Shabir Shah’s detention and Indian Foreign

Minister Sushma Sawraj's press conference in which she invoked Shimla Agreement to keep Kashmiris away from Pakistani leadership and in a way declaring them as "third party".

A dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad has always been fraught with dangers of not leading to a positive outcome, except for the period from 2003 to 2007. But in the past one and a half years of Narendra Modi's rule, there has been a flip-flop on this issue and clarity continues to elude as to how the process has to pursue.

Earlier, in July 2014, the Modi government unilaterally called off the Foreign Secretary level talks citing the objection to Hurriyat leaders meeting Pakistani High Commissioner or the visiting leaders. Dialogue should have first taken place between the two sides to hammer out a solution to this irritating hitch.

The talks were off but Modi himself called his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif in February conveying that he was sending his Foreign Secretary Jaishankar on a 'SAARC yatra'. There was no significant headway till the Ufa declaration came in June. If the sources are to be believed the Ufa meeting was also initiated by New Delhi. Notwithstanding an acceptable joint statement (in terms of Delhi's concerns) since Kashmir was omitted and seen in "all outstanding issues", the air continued to remain polluted with the lack of trust.

Nawaz Sharif had to face a hostile Pakistan when he returned from Ufa as no mention of Kashmir enraged the constituency that is wedded to it. It was like Manmohan Singh retracting from Sharm el Sheikh declaration with then Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani in which they had agreed to include the Pakistani concerns of Baluchistan.

Army, extremists and Kashmiri separatists were up in arms against Sharif for his compromise on Kashmir.

This should have set the ball rolling for more room to both the countries in the negotiations and the NSA-level talks should have been productive.

But the indicators suggest that both countries did not do any homework before Ufa as well as the NSA-talks to remove the irritants. But if the top officials in Pakistan Foreign Office are to be believed the issue of Hurriyat leaders was "conveyed well during the dates finalized for these talks".

A top ranking official said: "We were in fact ready for Foreign Secretary level talks on the side lines and our Foreign Secretary was accompanying the

NSA but Delhi did not respond till August 21 and on that day said that these talks were not possible" .

The Indian side surely has its own story to tell suggesting that Pakistan High Commission was informed about the problems that the meeting with Hurriyat could create.

What one could see in Pakistan is that Nawaz Sharif earned sympathy from even those who hate him. Irrespective of the fact as to who is to be blamed for the cancellation of talks since both sides have their own arguments, Pakistan seemed united on the issue. Military, civilian government, political parties, civil society and media were on the same page praising the Nawaz government for what they believe was an act of defiance against the Indian dictates.

Even those journalists who have soft corner for India are speaking a different language, accusing Modi of "deceiving" Nawaz and not reciprocating his desire to move forward on peace process.

In fact the day Ufa declaration was announced, former Ambassador K C Singh made an interesting comment during a TV debate saying that in past over one year if there is consistency vis-à-vis India-Pak relations it is from Nawaz's side and not from Modi's.

Whether the policy makers in Delhi agree with this or not but the fact is that Kashmir remained in more focus during this week-long drama than it would have been if the talks would have been held.

Firstly, to make Hurriyat meeting an issue in 2014 was itself a misplaced priority as they had been meeting the Pakistani leaders since 1995. Not only in Congress-led governments but also during Vajpayee's years the meeting used to take place and once a minister was asked to get away with this "irritant" saying "they are meeting them as Indian citizens".

The cancellation has not only helped Nawaz to resurrect his position in Pakistan, it has also brought the glory back to separatists and made them relevant. Not recognizing separatist leadership is in itself a big mistake New Delhi is making. Unless a two-track process of dialogue between New Delhi and Islamabad and New Delhi and Hurriyat (and others) is initiated no significant change can be expected on ground in Kashmir .

Alienation of people, despite 71 percent voting in elections, has been increasing with a sense of despondency that is shadowed by a renewed phase of violence.

It seems that Modi is on path of negating the policy that Vajpayee had followed vis-a-vis Kashmir and Pakistan. That is fair enough. But the question that arises is how different his policy is? It surely should be better than that of Vajpayee's so that Modi can realize the "dream" of emerging as a leader in South Asia, which he indicated when he organized a grand ceremony for his oath taking ceremony.

He cannot bring a better change than Vajpayee by creating war hysteria. The way Pakistan rejected the conditions for talks makes it clear that it has regained confidence after a semblance of stability within the country.

Three years back Pakistan might not have been so belligerent in saying that "we are also a nuclear country and know how to defend ourselves". It was in tatters and it had lost confidence. After it launched Zarb-e-Azab, it could control the internal militancy which reflects in its confidence today.

The only way forward for both countries is to hold dialogue after removing the glitches. That can only be done by adopting an out-of-box thinking to address all the issues. They must not start talking abruptly without doing groundwork. They also must put an end to madness at the Line of Control and International Border where the forces are playing with the mortars and guns like toys. It is infact the hostility at political level that makes them trigger-happy thus killing innocent civilians. That must end and peace has to prevail even if formal talks take time.

India, Pak NSAs meet at Bangkok, Dec 2015

After four-and-a-half hour long meeting between NSA Ajit Doval and his Pakistan counterpart, Nasir Janjua, on December 6, at Bangkok's Novotel hotel, several issues were discussed threadbare .

MEA Joint Press Release stated:

Pursuant to the meeting of the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan in Paris, the National Security Advisers, accompanied by the Foreign Secretaries, met in Bangkok today.

Discussions were held in a candid, cordial and constructive atmosphere.

They were guided by the vision of the two leaders for a peaceful stable and prosperous South Asia.

Discussions covered peace and security, terrorism, Jammu and Kashmir, and other issues, including tranquility along the LoC.

It was agreed to carry forward the constructive engagement.

India and Pakistan has undoubtedly a liking for maintaining a love-hate relationship akin to teenage romance. Essentially since Narendra Modi took over the reins of power in Delhi in 2014, the flip-flop has become the hallmark of his handling of the relations with Pakistan. Today even the most hawkish commentators in India have developed some soft corner for Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif whom they see as the victim of this handling. Not that everything in Pakistan was smooth, but Modi government's Pakistani policy has delivered a blow to his image as a "strong Prime Minister" with a strong mandate.

Sunday's surprise statement from Bangkok has once again rekindled some hope. It was not an ordinary meeting but a major breakthrough given the level of hostility both the countries had raised after the cancellation of National Security Adviser-level talks in August this year. Ahead of those proposed talks even the high level conference of presiding officers of Commonwealth countries became a casualty when Pakistan unilaterally called it off following India's objection in inviting the Speaker of Jammu and Kashmir Assembly. What is interesting is that all the initiatives to talk or to sit on the table have come from PM Modi, and the Bangkok meeting also was the outcome of an informal tête-à-tête' between Modi and his counterpart Nawaz Sharif during the Paris Climate Change Summit on November 30.

The Bangkok meeting is surely a breakthrough as it lays down a new foundation for a process of reconciliation between the two countries. Both New Delhi and Islamabad have climbed down from their positions to pave way for dialogue.

<u>Kashmir, Terrorism</u>

Kashmir and terrorism had emerged as contentious issues between the two sides as each one of them were equally concerned and at the same time threatened with their inclusion in the dialogue agenda.

For India, terrorism is a must to be discussed as it sends a signal to the masses that government is serious about it and it also symbolizes the strong posturing against Pakistan. This has become critical in the backdrop of the

wrestling that goes on between the parties in the elections. So the focus has to be on terrorism, otherwise the government in the power faces the heat. Similarly, Kashmir is a “jugular vein” for Pakistan and its non-inclusion in any dialogue not only brings a commotion in Kashmir constituency of Pakistan but also in Army that has Kashmir as an inalienable part of its doctrine to deal with India.

It is interesting to note that after the cancellation of August talks, both the sides seem to have put a lot of back channel effort to create a framework to deal with this knot. While Sartaj Aziz, the Adviser on Foreign Policy (read Foreign Minister) was simultaneously holding the charge of NSA, Pakistan’s insistence on holding talks on both terrorism and Kashmir was not out of place.

However, to clear this roadblock, Pakistan has moved in a right direction to appoint Nasir Janjua, an Army General as the new NSA, to level him at par with India’s NSA Ajit Doval, who also has a security background.

This has created a space for leaving political issues to Foreign Ministers or Foreign Secretaries. That is how the Bangkok meeting could see two foreign secretaries also sitting side by side. This means that Modi-Sharif pleasantries were not held in a vacuum but a lot of homework had been done behind the scenes.

Composite Dialogue

As rightly pointed out by the commentators, the Bangkok meeting could only be possible as it was without any prior announcement and was away from the media glare of both the countries. In the past even a sideline handshake between the leaders of these two countries has become a headline and followed by the questions that would push both sides back to square one. However, they have found a way to hold even the official level talks in a third country.

From 2004-2007 the back channel between special envoys were held in Bangkok, Dubai and other destinations thus leaving a large room for negotiations that could finally bear some fruit. To replicate that is a sound way to approach the tangled issues.

With secrecy being maintained on the progress of rapprochement, the two countries have nearly reached back to the Composite Dialogue framework that was agreed upon by the governments in the past.

Though opposed by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at that time, today it seems that when in power the parties realize that there is no way to approach any issue but the dialogue. Kashmir has been the bone of contention on both sides. BJP has been opposing its inclusion in the composite dialogue considering it as the internal issue. But with the derailment of the process, the government in Delhi must have seen the merit of including all the issues. In Ufa, it was Nawaz Sharif who gave a long rope to Modi by not mentioning Kashmir in the joint statement, though at the cost of strong opposition at his home turf, but on the face of it Modi could not capitalize on it and made the abandonment of meeting with Hurriyat as a condition.

The H-Factor

In the past over a year the K-word had been replaced by the H-word. The meeting of Pakistani leaders with the Hurriyat representatives, ahead of their official engagements in India, had emerged as a new spoiler in the game. In July 2014, the meeting of Foreign Secretaries scheduled in Delhi was called off only on the issue that the Pakistani Foreign Secretary was to meet the Hurriyat leaders. New Delhi unilaterally called off the talks. It again happened in August when Sartaj Aziz was heading to New Delhi to meet Ajit Doval. So the Hurriyat had now become a contentious factor in the management of relations between the two countries. For Pakistan it was difficult to abandon more than 15-year-long practice of meeting those whom they consider as the stakeholders in resolving Kashmir. But for BJP it had come under severe pressure in view of elections in various states as the Hurriyat issue had been made a mere electoral rhetoric. So going back on this in the immediate future had become near impossible. It is in fact the necessity for having dialogue that has forced both New Delhi and Islamabad to find a third option and that has come with a third country. It needs to be understood that both the countries have to move forward on the dialogue process, though the parties such as Hurriyat cannot be ignored in the final settlement.

New Beginning

The Bangkok breakthrough promises hope for a new beginning as Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj is scheduled to visit Islamabad and it would lead to creating an atmosphere amenable to PM Modi’s visit next year to attend the

SAARC summit. It will help both sides to remove bottlenecks on bilateral dialogue. This time the onus is on Modi to take it further and not jump to any unilateral decision to call the talks off. His image within India is not the same when he came to power. For his ambition to emerge as a “leader” in South Asia, which is evident from the message he sent across on his oath ceremony, he needs to have a working, if not, friendly relations with Pakistan. This will help bring some change on Kashmir as well .

India and Pakistan take on each other at 70th session of UN Assembly, Sep-Oct 2015

Much has been written about this year’s Indian and Pakistani discourses at the United Nations General Assembly. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif raised pitch over Kashmir by calling not only for the UN attention to resolve the intractable dispute but also shot off a four-point formula to make peace with India. On its part, India maintained cool, rather, preferred to ignore the diatribe.

Nawaz Sharif did receive appreciation for his “bold” stand vis-à-vis Kashmir at the UN, but the fact that most of the analysts ignore is that India was cautious about how Pakistan would behave at the UN this year. It was well understood that in the wake of cancellation of National Security Adviser (NSA)-level talks in August this year, for which the major part of blame rests on India, Sharif was expected to be a hardliner at the podium. He had no other choice. When the NSA level talks had to be called off on a rather “untenable” condition that New Delhi had put, Sharif came under tremendous pressure to say ‘No’ to the talks. The condition that Pakistani NSA Sartaj Aziz would not meet Hurriyat Conference leaders in Delhi became a stronger bone of contention between the two countries than the Kashmir dispute itself. Two days before that Pakistan had unilaterally called off Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference after India raised objection on not inviting the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly Speaker since it was being hosted in Islamabad.

When the NSA-talks came to a naught, Nawaz Sharif was in fact paying the debt to strong Kashmir constituency in Pakistan, which had taken umbrage over the omission of Kashmir at SCO Summit in Ufa. He had earlier been “taken to task” by the hardliners and the Army for giving long rope to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi by accepting his invitation to attend his

swearing-in ceremony. That was followed by cancellation of Foreign Secretary-level talks in 2014 on the same ground that Pakistan cannot hold any discussion with Hurriyat leaders prior to it. Those who opposed any engagement with Modi government cornered Sharif who lost his political authority over the contentious issue of talking to India.

This time when Sharif was addressing the UN, something different was happening on Indian side. PM Modi who was in the United States at the same time wooing the global market to India, chose not to attend the UNGA himself. Instead Foreign Minister Sushma Sawraj addressed the UN. This was perhaps a calculated move to not to give much importance to Sharif's expected speech at the UN. The response to his or Sartaj Aziz's speech was reduced to the level of First Secretary at India's UN Mission who exercise the Right to Reply.

However, that does not make Sharif and his speech at the UN irrelevant vis-à-vis Kashmir. It is a fact that it was after a long time that Pakistan devoted much time in the UN on India and particularly Kashmir. But it needs to be seen in the backdrop of heightened tension between the two countries in last over one year. As mentioned earlier, Nawaz was left with no choice but to raise the issue in this manner. Compare this year's Pakistan handling at the UN with previous years, one can easily find a stark difference vis-à-vis Kashmir. In case New Delhi and Islamabad had moved on the proposed roadmap as envisaged in Ufa joint statement and had not the borders witnessed bloody skirmishes, the flavor of India-Pakistan debate at New York would have surely been different.

It is pertinent to mention here that when Pakistan initiated peace process with India through the podium of UNGA on November 24, 2003, it was caught in a dilemma whether or not to make things tougher for India. It was the time when Pakistan was holding its non-permanent member seat in United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

"India was unmistakably worried that Pakistan might introduce some new initiatives on Kashmir particularly during our Presidency in May 2003," writes former Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in his book "Neither Hawk nor a Dove".

He writes in detail how Pakistan deliberated on the issue in the backdrop of waning support of international community in the wake of 9/11 .

Quoting an intense meeting with seasoned Pakistani diplomats, Kasuri writes “This meeting further confirmed my belief that the national interests of Pakistan and the interests of people of Jammu and Kashmir demanded a serious bilateral dialogue with India over this dispute as that was the only way to achieve a solution reflective of the aspirations of Kashmiris who have suffered for decades under the Indian occupation”.

Having said that, the fact remains that the UN resolutions provide a legal and moral authority to the dispute of Jammu and Kashmir. The UN resolutions are most authentic documents as the reply given by then Governor General of India Lord Mountbatten, on behalf of Indian cabinet, clearly states that the reference to the accession be referred to the people of Jammu and Kashmir. These resolutions are a strong base for finding a solution in the given situation and that is what Pakistan had been doing all along whether at the UN or outside it.

Another interesting development that took place was Nawaz Sharif gave a four-point formula to ease tension with India. He forgot that he took refuge under what his bête noire Parvez Musharraf had done in 2003. The four points: that Pakistan and India formalize and respect the 2003 understanding for a complete ceasefire on the Line of Control in Kashmir. For this purpose, call for UNMOGIP’s expansion to monitor the observance of the ceasefire. Pakistan and India reaffirm that they will not resort to the use or the threat of use of force under any circumstances. This is a central element of the UN Charter. Steps to be taken to demilitarize Kashmir, and fourth – unconditional mutual withdrawal from Siachen Glacier, the world’s highest battleground. This surely he did to bluff India. To that extent Nawaz Sharif managed to corner India as making noises of peace in the UN is something that cannot go unheard. He has again put onus on New Delhi. But one thing is clear that it was not an extraordinary situation created by Sharif as the impression is given by pro-Kashmir constituency in Pakistan or the resistance groups in Kashmir itself.

Notwithstanding the fact that the dispute has to be resolved, the road to that process goes through New Delhi and Islamabad, and of course at a later stage via Kashmir. UN or no UN, Kashmir is a wound that needs healing. Neither India nor Pakistan can run away from this reality .

CBMs while Mehbooba takes over as CM

Mehbooba Mufti, daughter of Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, took oath as the first woman chief minister of J&K state on April 4, 2016, almost three months after the death of Mufti Sayeed on January 7, 2016.

In the ongoing session of Jammu and Kashmir Assembly, Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti made a significant statement saying that her government had taken up the issue of opening more points to connect the two parts of erstwhile state across the Line of Control (LoC). She mentioned Suchetgarh-Sialkote, Kargil-Skardu, Nowshera-Mirpur, Gurez-Astoor-Gilgit and Chhamb-Jourian as some of those crossing points, which could see both countries opening doors for trade and people-to-people contact. She said the discussion in this regard was on "and I am hopeful that, if not all at a time, one or two at a time will be opened so that we can send Basmati from Jammu to there". A few days later, Industries Minister, Chandra Prakash Ganga informed the House that Kashmiri apple could soon find a place in the list of tradable items and that full-body scanners were also going to be a reality.

These statements came at a time when there is a stalemate between India and Pakistan vis-à-vis their initiatives (away from the stated positions and the rhetoric) on Jammu and Kashmir. In fact the state government led by Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) that espouses the cause of "Self Rule" has in the past couple of months put lot of attention towards its agenda of peace and reconciliation. On the ground, PDP might be drawing flak for joining hands with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but Mehbooba has been pushing on the cross-LoC Confidence Building Measures without any fanfare. The move to ask Government of India for including more crossing points has been made two months back and was only made public by her in the state Legislature. The government has also made strong recommendations for introducing banking facilities for the trade. The most significant step Mehbooba took was to recommend Nepal as a legalized route for those Kashmiri youth, who had crossed over to the other side for arms training, and who now want to return home and live a peaceful life. Hundreds of families have returned in past few years but they are facing a host of problems since they used Nepal as a route that is not legal and does not entitle the families for basic amenities of life once they return. Most of the youth who have returned have married in Muzaffarabad and other places and have wives and children who do not fall under any legal category. Giving Nepal route the legal status could ease their problems.

Bus Service

We may not have much hope with the CBMs initiated after 2005. But the fact remains that they have survived the vagaries of conflict as also the unending hostilities between India and Pakistan. The bus service that runs once a week on Srinagar-Muzaffarabd and Poonch-Rawlakot routes has brought huge relief to divided families on both sides. The process of getting the permits to travel on these bus services may be cumbersome but the stakes people in both parts have attached with this service is unimaginable. That is why over 25,000 people have benefitted from the service since 2005. It is because of these stakes that the bus service survived, though suspended for weeks together after the Mumbai attack of 2008 that completely derailed the India-Pakistan peace process, the beheading of Indian Army soldiers in Poonch in 2013 and number of incidents that had potential to take the situation back to square one. With the state government pitching for more routes, the utility of this important CBM will get strengthened. Not only should more crossing points be introduced but the ones opened after 2005 earthquake such as Teetwal should become permanent like other two points.

Most important push to see these CBMs delivering desired results can come in case the procedure for acquiring the permits is simplified. It also must be extended to general public and not confined to divided families. Till the time the final resolution of Kashmir becomes a reality, the concept of softening the borders is a great healer in the conflict. It moves beyond state sovereignty, territory and borders, focusing on people, economy and trade thus bringing a sense of belonging to those who feel partitioned.

Trad e

Much more than bus service the cross LoC trade has surprised those who watch it keenly. In absence of a proper mechanism and continued conspiracies against it, the trade too has survived. This is actually the demonstration of will of the people on both sides to forge the unity. Like the bus service, the conditions for productive trade have always remained elusive given the ever-tense relations between India and Pakistan. Still the trade, having a huge symbolic and emotive value, has survived. Not only do the shadows of hostilities continue to hover over it, conspiracies including small tiffs between traders to using this route for smuggling narcotics have

emerged as a bigger threat. If trade was suspended on both sides on many occasions due to shelling and firing between armies, it was also put on hold for many weeks in 2014 and 2015 when consignments of narcotics were recovered from trucks coming from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The drivers of the consignment continue to be behind bars in Baramulla jail.

The latest threat to trade came from the traders in Amritsar and Lahore who did not hold back in calling this trade “illegal and hawala” though the fact is that it is being supervised by two sovereign countries. Those traders might have their genuine concerns as they see this as a parallel trade impacting their business but this needs to be looked beyond that as it started as a CBM to consolidate peace in the region.

Today the trade is facing hiccups with banking. Though GoI has offered to introduce banking, Pakistan has not been positive in taking that forward. Cross-LoC trade, although agreed upon by India and Pakistan in 2004, only became a reality in 2008 in the wake of weeks of protests and strikes during the Amarnath land row. As the trade bodies in Jammu announced an economic blockade, the traders in Kashmir chose an emotional recourse by demanding the re-opening of traditional trade route via Muzaffarabad. Subsequently a joint call of “Muzaffarabad Chalo” was given and many people, including senior separatist leader Sheikh Aziz, were killed in police firing when a procession was stopped near Sheeri on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road. New Delhi’s position became precarious and to address the brewing resentment they unilaterally moved to give final shape to the cross LoC trade.

Even as the traders continued, on unofficial level, to thrash out differences and remove bottlenecks and set up the Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), governments failed to recognize it. JCCI is a spectacular achievement of bonhomie on both sides as it has members from Jammu, Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Mirpur and Gilgit-Baltistan chambers. It is currently headed by Y V Sharma, a former president of Jammu Chamber of Commerce and Industry whose voters are spread across the length and breadth of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir.

What is needed today is to strengthen these existing CBMs. If she succeeds in reopening more routes particularly Kargil-Skardu and Astor-Gilgit axis, Mehbooba Mufti will be realizing her father’s dream of reconciliation. Such steps may not bring a complete change on ground but it would surely help build an atmosphere of understanding between two Kashmirs which is must

to psychologically reconnect the people on both sides and give economics a space in peace building.

All Party Delegation led by Rajnath Singh visits Kashmir, Sep 2016

About two months after the killing of Hizbul Mujahiddin militant Burhan Wani that triggered massive unrest in Kashmir, an All Party Delegation visited Kashmir on September 4-5 2016. The APD was led by Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh.

The All Party Delegation (APD) visit to break the impasse in Kashmir could be the last effort in this direction. But it did not turn out to be so, leaving the situation as it was. APD comprised of 30 parliament members from different political parties including three ministers – Home Minister Rajnath Singh, Finance Minister Arun Jaitly and Minister of State in Prime Minister's Office Jitendra Singh. At the end of the two-day visit Singh, who led the delegation, did not sound optimistic about a breakthrough and repeated the government stand that Kashmir was, is and will remain an integral part of India. His assertion that doors were open for talks with all the stakeholders is not new and does not branch out into a specific route of a dialogue process.

The APD came at a time when Kashmir seems to be moving towards the point of no return. Government has lost control over the situation with processions and violent incidents being order of the day and no one is ready to listen to anyone. Imposition of curfew for over two months now, albeit with a break after 51 days, stands testimony to the fact that Kashmir has slipped out of all hands. Curfew is the last resort to bring back normalcy but when it continues for such a long rather record period, it also seems to outlive its utility. With 74 deaths and nearly 9000 injuries, Kashmir valley has been groaning in unbearable pain but that has united the people to be more resilient thus puncturing the theories of fatigue on which the government seemed to be banking upon till now.

As the joint resistance leadership comprising Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik refused to break the bread with the visiting parliamentarians, who happen to be from non-ruling parties with some

acceptability among Kashmiris, the possibility of a space for dialogue came to a near close.

With Geelani literally shutting his door on them, the scope for immediate engagement ended there and then. Mirwaiz and Malik had a brief tête-à-tête with Assaduddin Owaisi, Sitaram Yechuri, D Raja and Sharad Yadav but that was thrust on them since they were under government detention. All these leaders reminded the MP's of New Delhi's betrayals. Whether the "splinter group" had the approval of the delegation headed by Home Minister or not, but they tried and failed in infusing any hope of life to a dead Kashmir.

There are mixed reactions to the decision of the joint leadership, which has been giving unending strikes and protest calendars since July 9 after Hizb commander Burhan Wani was killed. Social media is abuzz with these reactions, but the significant one came from Finance Minister Haseeb Drabu who said he was hurt as according to him Geelani slamming the door on the MPs was against Kashmiri ethos. His views are virtually being condemned by many on social media, questioning his morality (in view of the killings and injuries in Kashmir) to say so. A set of people do echo the view that Geelani could have opened the door and entertain them as guests, hand over his six-point formula to them, without entering into any discussion and ask them to come back with a response. He could have perhaps followed what his two colleagues told them that there could be no talks under Indian constitution. But he stuck to his own position that gave a section of media a space to say that separatists were against talks.

However, it is important to understand the situation in which these three are placed. The government miserably failed to conduct itself before announcing the dates for APD. All these leaders have been under house arrest or in detention for these two months and if government really meant to use their influence to break the deadlock, they could have released them a few days before the delegation would arrive. This could have given them a space for consultations. No conflict resolution process is conducted by jailing the opponent on your own terms and then make them to talk. The process entails hectic engagement that leads to formal negotiations. Even if one does not agree with what Hurriyat and others espouse but their point is valid that how could they engage without any prior consultations among themselves. In today's Kashmir all those who have a position in one setup or other are not inclined to jump into a situation where there are no guarantees. The charged

atmosphere has seen anarchy where a block president of PDP who facilitated Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti's meeting in South Kashmir's Qazigund area had to lose his house to arson by the protesters. There are many cases where public ire has been demonstrated by attacking those whom the protesters see as collaborators. In that situation it has become difficult even for these three leaders also who take a decision that does not make them irrelevant.

Moreover, the experience of opening the doors for a similar APD in 2010 has left bitter lessons. That visit helped to bring situation back to normalcy as the government of the time promised engagement to resolve Kashmir. But after interlocutors were appointed, they submitted a report though within the ambit of constitution, it added to the list of betrayals that has been the hallmark of New Delhi's Kashmir policy since 1947.

Huge trust deficit has been the stumbling block for any fresh engagement in Kashmir and entering into a dialogue with New Delhi without any guarantees is the remote possibility that too in the backdrop of repeated assertions that there could be no talks outside the Indian Constitution. In the past, the governments, both led by BJP and Congress in Delhi, have held talks with section of separatists but without any conditions. They failed to yield any result even without any conditions. In this backdrop, what can be expected when conditions are put before doing any groundwork for such a political engagement. Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti invited separatist leaders for talks as PDP president but that too was without any home work. In any case the talks on the resolution have to be between New Delhi and those who challenge the accession and not at the level of state government.

Kashmir is passing through a crucial stage where normalcy is a thing of past. Security forces are looking at reclaiming the space lost to militants, state government is helpless and Government of India does not budge from its stand ignoring the fact that formalization of dialogue process is inevitable. While the onus of breaking the deadlock lies mostly on New Delhi, the other side also needs to do brainstorming on how Kashmir could proceed further. Government must release the leaders, allow them space and wait for how they respond to the situation. Both sides must look at this grim scenario with responsibility to save Kashmir from an impending catastrophe.

Yashwant Sinha's report strikes a chord in Kashmir The five-member civil society delegation led by former union minister

Yashwant Sinha and comprising former chief information commissioner Wajahat Habibullah, former Air Vice Marshal Kapil Kak, Shushoba Bharve, the executive director of Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation and veteran journalist Bharat Bhushan besides Sinha visited Kashmirin the last week of October 2016.

A group of eminent people not associated with the government has come up with a report on the realities that confront today's Kashmir given the absence of any acknowledgement of what is happening in the valley and remorse over civilian killings from the government. In the past, delegations that have visited Kashmir and talked to the people have "crafted" reports that would suit the government. But this group of concerned citizens, as they call themselves, which is headed by former foreign minister Yashwant Sinha, has laid bare what they encountered during their second visit to different parts of the valley from December 10. Besides Sinha, former Minorities Commission chairman Wajahat Habibullah, Air Vice Marshal (retd) Kapil Kak, noted journalist Bharat Bhushan and Track II activist Sushobha Barve are part of the group. "Once again, all members paid their own expenses and no financial help was accepted from any institution or government body to ensure the integrity of the group," they stated.

The group first visited Srinagar in October when the agitation was showing no signs of abating and the joint Hurriyat Conference was keeping a distance from those coming from Delhi. Formidable separatist Syed Ali Geelani decided to keep his door locked when a group of MPs led by Sitaram Yechury knocked on it in September 2016. But he opened it for the Sinha team, listened to them patiently, put forth his viewpoint and indicated that he was not averse to dialogue. The same was the case with Mirwaiz Umar Farooq. This breakthrough was significant since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Delhi has continuously refused to acknowledge the political simmering in Kashmir. Sinha, a BJP leader, succeeded in breaking bread with the Hurriyat that has emerged as a main stakeholder in the political crisis. The group's public stand that they were not sent by the government opened up space for dialogue, though Yasin Malik, who is part of the resistance trio, remained aloof.

After their second visit, the Sinha group made public a report that is now being debated from Srinagar to Delhi. The language of the report mirrors what has been said on the ground in the last six months of unrest. The group has hardly changed it, perhaps because they want to build on their credibility. Whatever the group has been told in the north and south Kashmir has been reproduced verbatim, thus bringing to the fore the real perspective. Fearing that matters may intensify after April 2017, the group has concluded that the hatred against India has grown especially among youngsters. Even those, according to the report, who would find India a better place to live in have distanced themselves from the idea given the apathy of the Indian state to their suffering.

The report is a significant acknowledgement from a team that had come from Delhi. In the past distortions in the narrative has been a hallmark of both government and non-government level dialogue, thus denting the credibility of any such process. For example, the report says, “The vocabulary of the youth has also changed, as has their psychological attitude towards India. They talk of curfew, hartals, martyrdom and Burhan (Wani).” Kashmiris, according to the group, have lost faith in India, the institution of dialogue, because New Delhi has failed them. The group prepared the report after meeting people who espoused almost all shades of opinion on the conflict. The cry is that Kashmir needs a comprehensive solution that they think cannot be delivered by the local parties since its magnitude goes beyond borders. “Kashmiris do not believe that the local parties in the State can resolve the political issue of Kashmir. They point out that this complex issue has to be addressed by all the stakeholders—India, Pakistan, and Kashmiris of the entire erstwhile kingdom of Jammu and Kashmir. Unless the three stakeholders address the issue, they believe, it cannot be resolved,” says the report.

It also emphasizes the need to engage with militants, particularly the Hizbul Mujahideen supremo Salahuddin, who leads the indigenous militant group. It has quoted an unidentified politician on this, stating that even the Hurriyat draws its strength from the militants. “Talking to Syed Ali Shah Geelani or the others here will not help. People are with the Hurriyat because it represents the militant sentiment. The day the Hurriyat leaders stop representing this sentiment, they will be changed. So talk to the people who

are responsible for most of the violence here, even if that means engaging with Hafiz Saeed unofficially. After all, our kids are going to his door."

Apart from institutional reforms, the group advocates opening the doors to dialogue, upholding human rights and engagement with youth. It takes a leaf from the Agenda of Alliance (AoA) reached between the BJP and PDP that talks about engagement with Pakistan and the Hurriyat. All the people the group met in Kashmir said that talking to Pakistan was an important route to find a solution. They also asked India to be part of grand initiatives such as CPEC. Whatever the Sinha group has reflected in the report belies the often-parroted narrative by the BJP government in Delhi. It punctures the status quo approach and puts the government in the dock. It is difficult for any government to discount these findings.

Interestingly, the hardline Dukhtaran Millat, which does not see any positives in such initiatives, has hailed the report as rational and an eye-opener for Delhi. This must serve as a push to the efforts made by the group. The group has so far done justice to the self-funded initiative and it must move forward on taking this reality to mainland India.

At UN General Assembly, September 2017

India and Pakistan exchanged barbs at the UN General Assembly with the representatives of two countries accusing each other of supporting terrorism. Pakistan Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi slammed India which was reciprocated by Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj. Pakistan's ambassador to the United Nations, Maleeha Lodhi, also joined the fray after Swaraj's speech on Spetember 23.

Much of what transpires at the annual general assembly at the United Nations is ritualistic. There is an exchange of pleasantries, written speeches, official dinners. Avenue One, where the UN is located in Manhattan, in the heart of New York, turns into an arena for mingling and networking, debating and sparring. But amid these traditional interactions one also sees the UN turning into a space where countries can put forth their "vision" for the future, not just for themselves but for the world.

This year American President Donald Trump used his first appearance at the UNGA podium to put forth his "vision" and threaten North Korea with destruction. This flew in the face of the understanding that the UN is a place

where nation states come together to talk about peace in the world and stitch together policies to make this happen. The larger question that then emerged to repeatedly make the rounds, was why contentious issues hardly seemed to move towards solutions, while soft issues were getting so much attention. Conflicts were certainly on the agenda but no interventions were in sight.

India, Pakistan

For a journalist from South Asia like myself, here to cover the UN and keen to observe the proceedings, there hardly seemed to be any change in the discourse. Only the traditional “wrestling” between India and Pakistan stayed in focus. Since both countries have refused to budge from their positions, their hostility also cast a shadow on their conduct in the general assembly.

It wasn’t always like this. There was less bickering just two years earlier, in 2015 when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s speech here had been softer in language and more reconciliatory in tone. (Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s peace overture had come in December 2015, despite the Pathankot attack on January 15 still souring the air.) In his September 2014 speech at UN PM Modi had mildly referred to Pakistan and said “We want to promote friendship with Pakistan too, but we can only talk without the shadow of terrorism over us.” But in 2015 he had given a miss to Pakistan in his speech he and was not too offending towards Pakistan.

But last year, in 2016, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif returned to a “war time” script since Kashmir was burning at the time after the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani. His angry stance was equally countered by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj. This year, the face on the Pakistani side was of new Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, the rich businessman who stepped into Nawaz Sharif’s shoes after he was unseated by an anti-corruption court. As I listened to PM Abbasi, I got the distinct feeling that I was hearing the speech from last—only the hands that held the white sheet on which the words were written had changed.

PM Abbasi mentioned Kashmir 17 times in his speech and India 14 times. He focused on human rights violations and India’s decision to deny the people of Jammu and Kashmir the right to self-determination. He even demanded a special envoy of the UN for the valley.

The response to his speech came as expected. First, a junior diplomat read from a text that introduced the epithet “terroristan” for Pakistan. Later,

Sushma Swaraj, who continued with her country's diplomatic mission for the second year as Modi gave UNGA another miss, made a scathing attack on Pakistan. She taunted Pakistan by saying that India was a model of development and prosperity while Islamabad had only produced terrorists. Her comparison between IIT and LeT, IIM and JeM and AIIM and HM drew a lot of attention on social media. She was reminded by many critics that India was also a "rapistan and lynchistan". Even left-liberals pooh-poohed her for selling to the world what Congress had done over six decades.

Nevertheless, New Delhi has succeeded in leveraging the "terror" factor when it comes to Kashmir. Swaraj was cautious; she did not use the word Kashmir once in her entire speech. These moves to delegitimize the political context and the content of the political movement have so far been bearing fruit. Delinking Kashmir from the larger narrative of terror will be an uphill task for Pakistan. The US has been repeatedly asking Pakistan to contain the militant organizations and that reiteration has come too vehemently in recent few months.

It certainly did not help that Pakistan's ambassador to the UN Maleeha Lodhi used an incorrect photograph to highlight the plight of Kashmiri youth who have been victimised by state violence. She showed a picture of a Gaza girl which India swiftly pounced on with its national media in hot pursuit. This drew the world's attention away from what should have been in the spotlight: the reality that the police and paramilitary forces have wounded and blinded thousands of young Kashmiris by pellets and guns particularly at the height of the uprising in 2016. The pain and rage of the Kashmiris was diluted by what turned into a "celebratory moment" for those who refuse to acknowledge this reality. Pakistan's bad management squandered a chance to drive home the brutality in Kashmir.

Amid the scripted wrangle that defined a India-Pakistan moment at the UN, there was one heartening moment when Bollywood actress Priyanka Chopra met Malala Yousafzai and tweeted, "Oh @Malala no words will be enough… I can't believe I..met..U!!You're just a young girl with so much heart..and such achievements.so proud". And she too was ecstatic: "Oh can't believe I met Priyanka Chopra." [sic] Certainly, there are no walls between people only between their governments.

India, US

The bitter exchange by these two neighbours was lost in the din at the UNGA. There was no substance on reconciliation and peace in their speeches.

India had a strong team led by Swaraj, joined by many diplomats and her junior minister MJ Akbar. Everything was calculated. Bonhomie between New Delhi and Washington seemed to be at play to position India as "different". Swaraj's participation in the committee on UN reforms and meetings with important people contrasted with how Pakistan was placed this time. The message Washington is sending is clear: India is an important factor in the South Asia strategy.

Relations between the US and Pakistan, on the other hand, have slumped since Trump's speech on August 21 had cast a shadow over Abbasi's visit to UN. He also came at a time when both sides are struggling to deal with deterioration in ties. Prime Minister Abbasi met Vice President Mike Pence but this was hardly a cause for celebration. The US administration's hardline position was amply demonstrated; there can be no compromise over terrorism. Pakistan's strong reaction to Trump's speech had already pushed relations back with Islamabad cancelling a visit of high-profile diplomats from Washington and Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif's visit to the US. It was only Chief of Army Staff General Asif Bajwa's speech on September 6 that hinted at reconciliation while maintaining that Pakistan cannot be ignored in the geopolitical importance of the region. But the message one could draw from this year's session at UNGA was clear that curtains had been drawn on South Asia policy. Rather than fighting it out at the dark green podium at UN, both countries must explore the scope of sitting across the table back home.

INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURS

India and China's dangerous border game

On August 21, NDTV reported Chinese intrusion into Arunachal Pradesh a week before. Citing reports, it said Chinese troopers had stayed put in Arunachal Pradesh's Chaglagam area for three to four days before going back. Another news channel aired a video footage with the title 'Chinese troops intrude 20 kms inside Arunachal Pradesh' on the same day.

A leading TV channel created a stir last Thursday (3rd week of Aug 2013) by telecasting the footage of a face-off between Indian and Chinese armies in Tawang region in Arunachal Pradesh. It apparently showed the Indian Army in a helpless position as they were virtually treated with kid gloves by their Chinese counterparts. If the sources are to be believed the video footage is two year old but the channel chose to crack a whip on the government for being "soft" towards China. Many people may not agree with what is being shown and discussed on that particular channel but one thing is clear that India has not been too aggressive against China, when it comes to their intrusion whether in Arunachal Pradesh or in Ladakh sector of Jammu and Kashmir.

Notwithstanding a forward movement in the engagement between two countries at the political level, the instigating posturing on the borders remains the same. The three-week-long standoff between the two armies in Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) in Ladakh sector in the month of April was something which really shook the Indians as the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China refused to vacate the area, they claim belongs to China.

On April 15, 2013, a platoon-sized contingent of PLA set up a camp in Raki Nula, 30 km south of DBO near the Aksai Chin-Ladakh LAC. The PLA vacated the area after 20 days of intense negotiation between the two countries. On July 16 and 19 Chinese troops had entered deep into Indian territory in Chumur and Demchok areas, located 300 km from Leh. It was raised by Indian side in Border Personnel Meeting (BPM) on July 27 and objections to the incursions were flagged and concern was expressed over a construction of a tower being in the Chinese side on the LAC in Demchok-Fukhche sector. The Indian side had said the construction was in violation

of Peace and Tranquility Agreement signed between the two countries in 1993.

The tension on India-China border has not eased and the way both the countries are getting conscious about the “threat” to “their territories” has actually worsened the situation. A just concluded visit to Ladakh by the author could provide an insight into what was happening in the desert region, which has of late attracted the attention of policy makers in India.

A three-member team of National Security Advisory Board headed by its chairman and former Foreign Secretary Sham Saran visited both Leh and Kargil districts of Ladakh on August 6, to get the firsthand account of what was happening in the region. Saran’s team visited DBO, Demchok in south of Aksai Chin, Chumur and Pangong lake areas. Saran’s visit was significant as it was not only to boost the morale of the troops in Ladakh but also to send a veiled message to China as to how seriously India had taken the violations .

During his meetings with politicians of Leh, Saran is believed to have been told in clear terms that the issue of demarcating the borders with China should be settled once for all. “We strongly believe that we are the real sufferers and we have conveyed to Delhi that the demarcation issue should be resolved and all routes of trade in the region should be thrown open,” an influential politician in Leh told the author.

The demarcation has been an issue which has not been resolved for decades now. The last demarcation, which is in force, was perhaps done way back in 1911. On British India maps it was Johnson-Ardagh and the Macartney-MacDonald lines which were used to define the areas. Until at least 1908, the British took the Macdonald line to be the boundary, but in 1911, the Xinhai Revolution resulted in the collapse of central power in China, and by the end of World War I, the British officially used the Johnson Line. Even after 1962 war, no line was drawn, thus the threat of violation of either side continued to loom large. While China claims about 90,000 square kilometres of land in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, India accuses China of occupying 38,000 square kilometres in the Aksai Chin plateau. India and China have held 15 rounds of talks over their border dispute since 2005 but failed to reach any agreement, highlighting the deep-going nature of the dispute.

Since China has done a full scale development on its side with black topped roads, electricity and other facilities reaching to the last point, India has not been able do much. After the recurring incursion from China and also the Kargil war in 1999, which took India by surprise, a huge build up has been taking place on the Indian side in Ladakh. Soon after the war a separate Corps of the Army was carved out of 15 Corps headquarters in Srinagar to strengthen the supervisory grid. An Armoured regiment has also been made functional in the area and deployment has increased.

With these steps of build up and India's keenness to develop the roads to the last point, China has apparently been panicked with these developments and is all set to frustrate the Indian plans. Though India has been seemingly soft on this issue, downplaying the incursions and violations, of late it has started exhibiting its "power". On August 20 the Indian Air Force landed its C-130J Super Hercules transport plane at the world's highest and recently activated airstrip at Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO). It appeared to be a subtle but strong message to China, and the IAF demonstrated its ability to use the heavy-lift aircraft to induct troops, supplies, improve communication network and also serve as a morale booster for maintenance of troops positioned at such heights in Ladakh region. The US made aircraft of the special operations squadron is capable of undertaking quick deployment of forces in all weather conditions, including airdrops, besides landing on unprepared or semi-prepared surfaces.

As of now five battalions of Indo-Tibetian Border Police (ITBP) are entrusted with the job of guarding the border with a back up from Army. But of late the expansion of Army in Ladakh region is seen as a serious effort of New Delhi to keep China at a bay, though its "weakness" in being more belligerent is more than apparent. What is worrying for the China is India's growing interest towards fortifying its borders with China and making supply lines more reliable. For example the proposed Rohtang tunnel connecting Ladakh with rest of India for whole of the year is something which has panicked Chinese as the supply to Defence forces will be uninterrupted round the year. As of now the traditional supply line from Srinagar is blocked for the winter months. Apart from this the Strike Corps that will come up in Panagarh in West Bengal is aimed at with full attention to China. The Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) on July 17 gave its nod to the formation of this highly significant Corps, which will come up at

the cost of whopping Rs 64,000 crores. This is the first time after the humiliating defeat in 1962, India is asserting against China. But this surely will not be taken easy by China.

However, India is also looking towards the sustainable engagement at the political level. In reciprocation of Chinese Defence Minister Liang Guanglie in September 2012, Defence Minister A K Antony visited China in July this year amidst heightened tension between the two countries. Now Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is expected to visit China in October. The two sides have agreed in principle to do more exchanges, resume joint exercises and conclude border defence cooperation agreements (BDCA).

Despite China's relations with Pakistan being a source of friction and the decades long disputes, India and China have also developed deep economic ties in the past decade; bilateral trade jumped from $US5 billion in 2002 to $75 billion in 2011. However, Indian officials note that China still enjoys a huge trade surplus in its trade with India.

This may move on but the tension in Ladakh does not show much of respite and until the issue of demarcating the boundaries is not resolved, the political moves may continue to be under pressure from the threat of face offs.

India, Pak and the Afghan endgame

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was a NATO-led security mission in Afghanistan, established by the United Nations Security Council in December 2001. It ceased operations and disbanded in 2014.

Post International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) withdrawal from Afghanistan is a scenario that has thrown up more than one concern for the bigger players in the game. Whatever the fate of Afghanistan and its people, the issue which is being paid attention from Washington to Delhi is the Indian role in the stability and reconstruction of a country that is in tatters due to the successive wars it has seen for over three decades now.

With Washington and Delhi being closer to each other than the significant distances both maintained during the cold war, the role for Delhi is not out of the ambit of the discussions that are taking place on the subject. But despite India's visible presence in current Afghanistan, the greater effort to secure more space in the process of deciding its fate post ISAF withdrawal

is becoming a major source of not discomfort but irritation for Pakistan. For past over few years, India's current as well as future role in Afghanistan has been a subject that Pakistan does not want to even consider for discussion. However, India is insisting on opening up formal talks with Pakistan, as it is aware of the sensitivities entailed with such a precarious situation.

Delhi has its own theory of getting involved in Afghanistan. From claiming its older civilisational links with the region to helping Afghanistan to become a country worth living, India has also been trying to display the greater power it presumably assumes in the region. What helped it, to be seen in Afghanistan, was the battered relation the Karzai regime has with Pakistan and its deterioration helped to open up more doors for India's involvement.

Karzai government has been at logger heads with Islamabad right from Musharraf's time till today as it strongly believed that certain important sections in the Pakistan's security establishments had been helping Taliban to destablise Afghanistan. Nevertheless Pakistan's geographical proximity to Afghanistan could not keep it at bay as far as its role in the post September 11 attacks is concerned.

Delhi's increasing effort to fit in the "great game" that is likely to ensue after the 2014 withdrawal, however, has not been reciprocated positively by Pakistan for varied reasons. The divergent rather opposite views are part of any discourse that is shaping on these lines. At a recent high level Track-II dialogue on India-Pakistan facilitated by German think tank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the differing views were more than clear. Pakistani participants were clear in their thinking that Pakistan had a lead role in Afghanistan and they also aired the concerns about what they call India's "sinister" support to certain separatist groups along the borders in Pakistan. The charge, Indian participants would vehemently refute.

As of now Delhi would only insist on having a dialogue on the subject, which of course is not palatable to Islamabad. This silent war has been going on for long time. With Delhi spending more than $ 2 billion in past several years on the "reconstruction" process in Afghanistan, its stakes are increasing and that is why Islamabad sees "red" in Delhi being too "enthusiastic". I remember how Shah Mehmooh Qureshi, the then Foreign Minister of Pakistan vehemently opposed India's role in London Conference (on Afghanistan) in January 2010. He succeeded in curtailing

India’s influence saying that joint Af-Pak policy was not applicable to Pakistan. He had earlier expressed his fears in an interview to Los Angeles Times on October 3 2009 when he emphasized “If you want Pakistan focused more on the [threat from Afghanistan in the] west, then we have to feel more secure on the east. There is a linkage there. ”

Qureshi had gone to the extent of questioning India’s motives in Afghanistan. “If there is no massive reconstruction, if there are no long queues in Delhi waiting for visas to travel to Kabul, why do you have such a large presence in Afghanistan? At times it concerns us.” He told Bruce Wallace in the same interview.

India’s keenness to have a greater role in Afghanistan may not be out of place. But one thing Delhi ignores is that it is deeply connected with its relations with Pakistan. Unless both Islamabad and New Delhi are on at least a normal mode in their relations, the latter’s involvement in Afghanistan is fraught with the dangers. For that matter any government in Pakistan cannot afford to allow a space to Delhi keeping in view its domestic pressures. For the time being India may be enjoying a cozy relation with Karzai government but after the withdrawal the equations are bound to change. For example, will the Taliban (in case they make a comeback) be amenable to India’s role in Kabul.

The biggest danger that looms large in this whole game is that with continuation in bitterness on both sides, the extremists in Pakistan will not allow Islamabad to have any deal with India on Afghanistan. For them Kashmir is the best “weapon” to use. So the noise about militants making their way into Kashmir after the withdrawal may come true in case India’s influence in Afghanistan increases without bringing a semblance in the relations with Pakistan and break ice on Kashmir. The extremists in Pakistan will hold sway and Afghanistan could well be a new battlefield for both the countries if not a direct one but at least by proxy. Without moving forward on the path of reconciliation on critical issues such as Kashmir, both India and Pakistan should desist from making any “deal” under compulsion or external influence. Otherwise it will mean an extension of an unending misery that Afghanistan has embraced for last 34 years.

Erecting the Wall of Hate

In late 2013, there were unconfirmed reports about UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government considering erecting a wall on International Border in Jammu region to stop the infiltration of militants .

To my understanding one significant development that has almost gone unnoticed towards the end of year 2013 is the talk of a concrete wall on International Border in Jammu. Those keeping an eye on India-Pakistan relations and the future of an amicable settlement over Kashmir dispute have not debated the issue even as it merits a discussion in the backdrop of no signs of normalization in the relations between the two countries. It is a fact that in India the elections for choosing the government in Delhi are just a few months away and a sustained process of started the dialogue over critical issues is not expected nor should be pressed for. But no move to further the distances should be allowed by those who work as peace makers in the region.

In the time of breaking of walls of hatred, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is all set to earn a dubious distinction of erecting the one on International Border in Jammu and Kashmir. The wall is aimed at stopping the infiltration from across Pakistan. India says infiltration has increased recently. In the last week of September, militants presumably crossed the international border in Jammu to make two daring attacks on Indian police and army in Samba district, claiming 10 lives. The attacks shook both sides, as prime ministers of India and Pakistan were scheduled to meet a day later in New York.

Infiltration from “across the border” has been a two-decade-old phenomenon along the Line of Control (LoC) and the international border, albeit with a relative calm during the years of “peace” that prevailed on borders on both sides. But the novel way to fight back infiltration and what the Border Security Force (BSF) call securing the villagers from the Pakistani shelling and firing is something that comes as a huge disappointment on the peace front. People who visit Berlin get a piece of the infamous Berlin Wall to bring it home and let the newer generations know how people had been divided. The demolition of the wall is celebrated as a victory for peace and rational thinking.

When I visited Berlin for the first time in 2002, I too saw people jumping to get photographed near the parts of the demolished wall, which has been preserved for that purpose only. I too posed for a picture and got a small piece as a souvenir. It was not just a souvenir to fit in a decoration shelf in drawing room only but it reminded me of the wall, though not concrete, that is dividing thousands of families across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir. To a great extent the bus services in Srinagar and Poonch have brought a relief to those families but much more needs to be done.

IB may be different case and there may not be urgency for families to reunite, but to have a cemented wall does not convey anything but to hinge on to the warring nature of relations both India and Pakistan have practiced so far. The Government of India has started to build a 10-meter high wall on the 198-kilometer long border that separates Jammu from Pakistan. It is reportedly being funded by the Ministry of Home Affairs and will be handled by BSF, which guards the borders. Ironically it will be higher and wider than both the Berlin Wall and the barrier that Tel Aviv is creating. It will be 135 feet wide and pass through 118 villages in the districts of Jammu (72), Kathua (17) and Samba (29). Inspector General of BSF in Jammu S S Tomar justified the wall building saying that it will secure the lives of villagers. He also informed that the issue would be raised with Pakistani Rangers.

Regardless of whether Pakistan will have an objection to the project, it opens a new chapter of mistrust between India and Pakistan. In 2000, the BSF had faced stiff resistance from Rangers for a similar type of work. This time, however, things are different. There is a 12 feet high parallel fence with an eight-foot gap in the middle filled with coils of razor-sharp concertina wire. This time the confidence is based on the fact that the wall would be built on Indian territory and the objection from Pakistan would not be tenable. “Dispute theory will not work in case of the international border as it works for the LoC,” a top official told me. But that surely does not help to resolve the larger issue of Kashmir either.

A concrete wall concretizes the animosity and hatred with which both the countries have been living for the last six decades. In the past, the border has been relatively calm. The mechanism to maintain cool on the international border has been different from that on the LoC. In the last few months of renewed hostilities between Delhi and Islamabad the

international border has also witnessed some heat, but after the October 29 flag meeting between the BSF and Rangers, things have been calm.

The question is not just of building a wall, which India thinks will end shelling and infiltration forever. It may help to ease the situation on the border, but the larger impact of this decision will be adverse on the relations between two countries, which are trying to come out of the atmosphere of hostility. It is ironic to see the Congress-led government of UPA laying a strong foundation for this hatred at the far end of its second term in power. At the time peace is seen as a benchmark of relations between the battered neighbors and the demand for opening traditional trade routes like Jammu-Sialkot is growing louder, the Manmohan Singh government is virtually shutting the doors on it.

Interestingly, the hard-line and right wing Bhartiya Janata Party that ruled India from 1998 to 2004, laid strong foundations for dismantling these walls of hate. During the Vajpayee government historic moves of cross-LoC Confidence Building Measures changed the course of history. The Manmohan Singh government carried forward that process but now the same government is taking a step that is detrimental to any success of a process aimed at peace and reconciliation.

Pakistan’s response on this wall is not yet known though the separatists have reacted sharply to the development. But the fact is that the proposed wall is not in the interest of any process that is aimed at finding a resolution of Kashmir problem. It is not healthy for friendly relations between the two countries. It is true that people living along borders suffer in wake of the shelling and firing, but for that both sides need to find a peaceful mechanism and continue to leave some space for seeing each other in eye in peaceful times because a wall in every sense means a wall.

A new low after border skirmishes in Jan 2015

Relations between India and Pakistan are again at a new low as hostilities across the International Border (IB) and the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir have intensified with the beginning of year 2015. At least seven people including civilians have been killed in the renewed shelling and firing from either side. Amid an uneasy calm both New Delhi

and Islamabad have been blaming each other for the provocation. Even unveiled threats have become part of a discourse that is shaping up now.

An “apparently empowered” Defence Minister of Pakistan Khawja Asif talked of the “language India can understand” and on January 4 he even tried to put India on defensive by saying “India wants to keep us busy in a low-intensity war or low-intensity engagement on our eastern border. They are pursuing the same tactics of keeping our forces busy on all fronts”. Earlier Pakistan’s Foreign Affairs Adviser Sartaj Aziz had protested to External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj by saying that the Border Security Force had called the Rangers for a flag meeting but they instead opened fire. But Swaraj refuted the allegations saying “Pak commanders responded to our defensive fire by using higher caliber weapons, expanding conflict zone, targeting civilian habitations”. She also warned of consequences in case the mechanisms are not followed.

This acrimonious war of words not only brings to the fore the deep mistrust both the sides have developed but also the fact that the situation could take any turn. Even an incident of fishing boat casting off into Arabian Sea near Keti Bunder, 100 kilometers from Karachi became an issue of “Pakistan exporting explosives to India”. The incident, however, was caught in the controversy within India even as the boat that blew up was marked as “Terror Boat”. Two influential dailies The Indian Express and DNA raised questions over the claims that it was meant to carry explosives to India. Leading security expert Ajai Shukla dissected the press release from Ministry of Defence as also the inputs from intelligence sources. “Questions also abound over the MoD’s contention that there was an explosion on board. In a fuel fire, any high explosive on board the vessel would simply have caught fire and burnt, not exploded” he wrote in Business Standard. Immediately dismissing the boat as a “Terror Boat” also put in the context the strand relations and the level of mistrust that exists on both sides. In this particular case the example of November 26, 2008 attack in Mumbai came handy to link it with terror. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi not making any statement vis a vis this fresh spate of violence across the borders and no investigation launched to see what exactly happens on borders, it has shrunk the space for creating an atmosphere of reconciliation. It is not known what is happening on Pakistani side and why the Pakistan’s ISI, Army or Rangers are engaged in a renewed phase of

hostility. But on Indian side it is steadily becoming clear that as of now reconciliation with Pakistan is a closed chapter.

This all started in July last year when New Delhi took a major rather surprising step to unilaterally call off the Foreign Secretary-level talks in view of Pakistan High Commissioner meeting separatists in Delhi. At that time it was seen as “fulfillment” of Modi’s electoral promise in which he had talked tough in dealing with Pakistan with regard to terror. “Terror and talks cannot go hand in hand,” Prime Minister Narendra Modi repeatedly said during the election campaign. But he had himself given a “pleasant” surprise when he invited all heads of the SAARC countries including Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing-in ceremony. Diplomatic circles were taken aback as it was something different one would expect from a tough talking Modi. If the insiders are to be believed New Delhi was keen to see Nawaz Sharif being part of the tumultuous ceremony but it could be covered up under the larger outreach to all SAARC nations.

Political grapevine is that Modi has not been able to rein in the “hawks” within the establishment who are drawing inspiration from RSS agenda to adopt a tough posture vis-à-vis Pakistan. Pakistan has surely not given a fair deal to India as far as the trial of Mumbai is concerned, or the latest drama about Zaki ur Rehman Lakhvi is one example. But New Delhi too is not clear about its policy. It seems that the hard-liners within BJP, as also the RSS, have so far succeeded in implementing their hawkish agenda. This was the case during Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s tenure as well but he sidestepped the hawks and walked many extra miles. He crafted a mechanism of separating party interests from diplomacy. He showed how political leadership could assert itself and work independent of jingoistic agency thinking. That is how he stood alone among the Prime Ministers of India .

For Modi also, it was an opportunity to use his mandate and power to do something different. But so far he has not left any imprint of departing from the traditional mindset that runs the establishment. While being leader of the largest democracy in the world and biggest power in South Asia, he could have easily moved forward on his “intent” to carry along South Asian countries, as he had indicated by inviting SAARC heads to his investiture ceremony. Moreover, the electoral achievement he had in recent Assembly

elections in Jammu and Kashmir, though no achievement in Valley, he could use the state's unrest to open doors for reconciliation with Pakistan. After his stern message to his troops in November asking them to "Fire at will" in retaliation to Pakistani firing he has not made any major intervention in this phase of hostility. May be he is not happy with what is happening but he needs to come out of tutored situation and give a new hope to people using his power and mandate.

With the tension escalating on borders, the brunt of this renewed hostility will have to be borne by the people who live along the borders. What all stakeholders fail to realize is the fact that the ceasefire announced in 2003 and followed up with more Confidence Building Measures on both sides of Jammu and Kashmir had yielded dividends for the general public. This bonhomie from 2003 to 2008 might have upset the hawks and vested interests on both sides, but it had done wonders on re-engagement of people across Line of Control and giving relief to lakhs of people living on the borders. Their lives had dramatically changed and they could live in peace after more than a decade.

While Pakistan needs to change its policy and not take any step that is provocative, the government led by Modi in Delhi also has to work for bringing peace to the region.

Dulat's revelations

First a caveat that I am yet to read former Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) chief A S Dulat's book "Kashmir—The Vajpayee Years" so a comprehensive review is not possible without reading it. However, the book has already created a political storm in Jammu and Kashmir and rest of India. The book is selling like hot cakes and in Srinagar, Gulshan Books, the premier publishing house, has sold 100 copies in few hours. But not many authors are as lucky as Dulat. Kashmir is otherwise a reason for a book to be hit, if it has some sensationalism in it. And before its launch, Dulat promoted it through interviews on TV channels and print media, making people more curious about the "revelations" he has made.

Going by his interviews and the excerpts that are out in media, one can only say that it is a memoir of a leading spymaster who has seen rather dealt with Kashmir very closely. While there is not much to read about his

chequered career of over 35 years, his focus in the book as the title suggests is on Kashmir that too during the eventful years of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's tenure as prime minister of India. That period was surely the most significant one vis-a-vis a process in and for Kashmir taken up by both India and Pakistan. Since Pakistan was on board for the first time, under General Parvez Musharraf's rule, to push for the process to find a solution to the problem, it made sense that those among the separatists in Kashmir would be part of it. It was surely with the concurrence of Islamabad that a major section among separatists, who later were bracketed as moderates, became part of the process.

It is a well known fact that Musharraf publicly maintained that all separatist leaders except the hardliner Syed Ali Geelani were on board as far his four-point formula and other parts of the process are concerned. And if Dulat has detailed about the same, it is just the repetition of the stories we have heard for long. But it certainly is seen as an "official stamp" when it comes in black and white from a person who was in the thick of things.

Dulat has made some other "revelations" as well. But again some of them are already in public domain. He has talked about how militancy was being funded in Kashmir, how Shabir Shah was pinned to be the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir and how former militant commanders who were involved in killings and kidnappings came around. These are certainly some of the "secrets" he has taken the lid off. But if we take one revelation of funding militants as Gospel Truth, then it becomes a serious issue. I am not sure whether Dulat is mixing the support of pro-government Ikhwanul Muslimoon with that of the separatist militancy. If we take it in case of the latter, it raises more questions than it answers. We as Kashmir observers all believe that militancy has been aided and abetted by Pakistan. But at what time did India support it and why did it do so? A pertinent question here is that Dulat was heading the Kashmir branch of Intelligence Bureau from 1988 to 1990, the formative years of militancy. It needs to be seen as to what was his role in those years as the head of the IB. Was he in some ways shutting his eyes when thousands of boys were heading to other side of Kashmir to become militants? This, if true, somehow vindicates the ever present "cynical view" in Kashmir that New Delhi also wanted trouble in the state. The revelation about Shabir Shah is also explosive and merits a debate.

Here the issue is not about the book and the “secrets” it has revealed. It needs to be seen much beyond revealing these secrets. Whatever he has written in the book, as brought out in few reviews and interviews, it reflects how the state has been dealing with Kashmir. As rightly pointed out by Jonathan Powell, the architect of Northern Ireland peace accord: “At the end we realized that peace was not an event but a process”, Dulat’s book has not contributed to any such process but has rather shut the doors on it. More than 25 years have passed, only a short-lived process was initiated and some results were achieved in the shape of Confidence Building Measures across the Line of Control. With Dulat “exposing” all those who believed in Delhi to support that process, it is unlikely that any such force would be willing to be part of it.

Those who had taken part in that process had not done anything wrong but the lessons for them to learn are simple and that is the repetitive exercise the Indian state has been doing. Engage with people, leak it selectively to media or now through the book and discredit the leaders. The book largely tells us about the machinations of Indian state and its murky deals in Kashmir. Such accounts may be “exposing” the leaders but it does not paint a rosy picture of New Delhi’s dealings in Kashmir. To discredit the leaders in the eyes of public has been a long-standing policy of the state and that is why there is no reconciliation between Srinagar and Delhi.

People in Kashmir have never believed Delhi and vice versa. Apart from projecting certain people as “informers” and “traitors” in the eyes of people, Dulat has also tried to discredit the Hizbul Mujahideen supremo Salahuddin, who had fought 1987 elections and was believed to have been defeated even after winning it. Projecting the migration from one medical college in Jammu to Srinagar as securing admission is a big error in the book. It completely changes the context of the issue. One thing that is heard now is that the management of Acharya Sridhar College in Jammu was at pains to see that migration materialized as having Salahuddin’s son in the campus was becoming a problem with them. They used the “friendship” with Farooq Abdullah and got his migration done. But Salahuddin surely needs to counter the allegation that he had contacted the then IB chief in Srinagar.

One important thing, which cannot be ignored, is the friendship between Dulat and Farooq Abdullah. In an interview to Suhas Munshi of Catchnews,

he says he first talked about the idea of writing this book with Farooq Abdullah. That is why the flavour of friendship is evident in the book.

The book also needs to be read in that backdrop. Here the question is that has Dulat written the book to shut all the doors on any process aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the problem. The only man who steers clear in this book is Syed Ali Geelani and surely his stock will improve and justifiably so. What is the objective of writing this book at a stage when no process exists at all merits an answer.

Imagine if a Pakistani spymaster dealing with Kashmir writes a memoir, many more skeletons are bound to tumble out of the cupboard.

So hard to bury the hatchet

Yesterday, I came across an interesting post on Facebook over the flip flop in India-Pakistan relations. Besides reminding about the frozen turbulence that has been the hallmark of the bilateral relations since 1947, the post highlights an all-important dimension of the Indo-Pak hostility. It is about how humans have suffered on account of this unending face-off.

The Facebook post by a Kashmiri born American, Asmat Ashai, who celebrated her marriage anniversary on August 11 with her Kashmiri born husband, encapsulates the real feeling of how this divide has affected people.

“Our marriage anniversary will always be a reminder of Indo-Pak relations. 1974, no diplomatic relations between the two countries. We got married anyway! 2015 Pakistan and India still viewing each other through the barrel of a gun,” wrote Asmat who is actively involved in renaissance of Kashmiri music and culture at the international level.

Asmat’s husband Dr Showkat Ashai, who also happens to be her cousin, was born in Rajpora Kashmir and his family had migrated to Pakistan though settled in US for over 30 years.Asmat and Showkat’s story is one of the many stories that remind us of the pangs of partition. In my conversation with the couple, I have heard scores of stories on how difficult it has been for her husband to visit his home in Kashmir.

The number of divided families runs in thousands and majority of them have faced the wrath of governments on both sides amid the hostility. Notwithstanding the start of cross-Line of Control (LoC) bus service from

Srinagar and Poonch in 2005, the scars of indifference bore by these families have remained unhealed. According to government figures, over 24000 people have benefitted from this bus service in last 10 years. Though the procedure for acquiring the cross LoC permit is cumbersome and sometimes torturous, the bus service still played a huge role in bridging the gap.

With both India and Pakistan returning to the hostility in 2008, all these confidence-building measures have been left unattended. That is why the stories of despair are overshadowing rays of hope and the way Asmat has concluded her post speaks on behalf of all the sufferers of this division.

“Forty one years later, two beautiful children, amazing spouses of theirs and five grandchildren later, India and Pakistan still struggling. Come on guys give love a chance!!!” she writes counseling the two countries to open a window for peace and harmony.

What Asmat has written is infact the unheard voice of all those who have been hounded over a period of time in the name of sovereignty, security, national interest etc. But the reality is that all these fancy expressions can bear fruit when the people of these two countries are at peace.

Today when borders around the world have become meaningless, these remain sacrosanct only in terms of India and Pakistan and more significantly in case of Jammu and Kashmir. In the recent past, many developments have taken place vis-à-vis the relations between the two countries. There is spat over Pakistan’s denial to invite the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly speaker for a Commonwealth meet. While Pakistan maintains that Kashmir is a dispute and does not recognize the Assembly, India’s position is that the State is its integral part and that the Assembly is a true representation of the people.

A mega event was held at tourist spot Sonamarg last week with representation from all the SAARC countries except Pakistan. According to the organisers of the event, there was delay in issuing visas to them at the Indian High Commission in Pakistan.

While both governments can continue to clear the roadblocks for the formal talks, it is necessary that the people-to-people contact is allowed to create conducive atmosphere. From 2003 to 2007, the bonhomie between the two countries had created huge space for peace and reconciliation on both the sides. It had also given a reason to New Delhi and Islamabad to

move forward and take the dialogue to the next level. The entire process was derailed when Mumbai attacks took place and the vested interests are prevailing since then.

Even as the recent attacks by militants in Udhampur and Gurdaspur do not seem to have an adverse impact on the intentions of New Delhi to go ahead with the proposed meeting of National Security Advisers, Pakistan is apparently dithering on the issue. While both countries have in their joint statement in Ufa agreed to move forward, the onus is on them to carry on with what has been agreed upon .

Pakistan for a change should not have made the invitation to J&K Speaker an issue when in past mainstream leaders such as Omar Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti, Saifuddin Soz, M Y Tarigami, Late Molvi Iftikhar Ansari, Sharifuddin Shariq and Madan Lal Sharma have enjoyed hospitality in Islamabad.

Similarly, former Prime Minister of Pakistan-administered Kashmir Barrister Sultan Mehmood Choudhary and others have visited Srinagar. Unless there is a space carved out of stated position, the idea of peace cannot work. New Delhi should also expand the constituency of peace by being magnanimous in issuing visas to civil society and other groups which intend to contribute to peace.

In this backdrop it is time for both New Delhi and Islamabad to think afresh and shun the practice of showing each other down. As a first step, the cross-LoC contacts and the reunion between the divided families must be allowed to flourish. This will surely help the families like that of Asmat to come out of the trauma under which they have been living for last so many decades. Politicians and their shortsightedness have led these countries to the current impasse. Time has come that in order to find a lasting solution the borders have to be made meaningless. Even if tens of thousands of troops are deployed, those who believe in violence will still sneak in, only ending up in adding to the sufferings of civilians on both the sides.

Pathankot probe marks new beginning in Indo-Pak ties

On Januray 2, heavily armed group attacked Pathankot Air Force Station which is part of the Western Air Command of the Indian Air Force. Jaish-e-

Mohammed militant outfit claimed the responsibility on January 4 for carrying out the attack. The attack severed India-Pak ties almost instantly.

Notwithstanding the criticism from a section of media for allowing Pakistan's Joint Interrogation Team (JIT) to visit Pathankot for gathering evidence regarding the January 2 terror attack at the airbase, the move has opened up a new window for the joint efforts of the two countries to counter terrorism. To allow a Pakistani team that too with the participation of a Colonel rank officer from country's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) is in itself an unprecedented decision taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. And the willingness from Pakistan to allow a similar team from National Investigating Agency (NIA) is equally a leap forward in this direction.

Not only have both the countries picked up the threads from an effort envisaged and unveiled at Non-Alignment Conference at Havana in September 2006, but it has for the first time in a way led to an admission from Pakistan that the perpetrators of the attack indeed came from its soil.

While the four attackers who died in the encounter were identified as the ones from Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif's government has also arrested four people within the country who are believed to have been part of the ring that laid down the contours of the attack. So far Pakistan has been mostly in denial in such cases and even as Ajmal Kasab was caught alive and hanged after 2008 Mumbai attack, Islamabad continued to be in a denial mode. This way Nawaz Sharif government has also taken a big risk as it faces the highest order of extremism and the growing influence of non-state actors or their ideological mentors has started galvanizing the support against the government.

It is premature to predict whether the NIA team will be given access to those whom they want to interrogate. Specifically, NIA has been seeking access to Moulana Masood Azhar, head of Jaish-e-Muhammad, which Government of India believes is behind the attack. Though it is not known what transpired between the JIT and NIA during their discussion in Delhi last week but the indications that came after the meeting were quiet positive. NIA Chief Sharad Kumar told a news conference on April 1 that a team from India would visit Pakistan to follow up the probe. "We expressed that a team of NIA could be sent to Pakistan for a probe since the

conspiracy was hatched in that country. They welcomed the idea and the dates will be worked out later," he said. The JIT examined 16 witnesses inclosing the Superintendent of Police Sulwinder Singh and his jeweler friend. Obviously when Indian team would visit Pakistan it would also seek examination of those who are on their list though Masood Azhar may turn out to be a bone of contention. But the fact remains that both countries have made a positive movement forward.

Despite the noises made by Congress and also the Aam Admi Party, the JIT's arrival has sent a clear signal about the fact that both New Delhi and Islamabad was not paying attention to the "usual rhetoric" in both the countries. It is in fact the politics, that too in the times of elections, that makes political parties to use such occasions as fodder. Ironically, it was the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government led by Congress that began with the idea of joint mechanism. And interestingly that time the Bharatiya Janata Party had opposed the move of joint efforts. When the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan's President Parvez Musharraf met in Havana in September 2006 to lay a framework for the joint efforts to counter terrorism, the development was interpreted as a sign of giving in to the "Pakistan's trap". BJP leader Yashwant Sinha condemned the joint statement by Singh and Musharraf as "an unprecedented capitulation of India before Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism." He added: "Resumption of the foreign secretary-level talks between the two countries in the background of increased violence from Pakistan is not acceptable to us."

As the composite India-Pakistan dialogue had been derailed with July 2006 train blasts in Mumbai, both sides agreed to resume it in Havana. Both sides "resolved to create a joint institutional mechanism to identify and implement counter-terrorism initiatives and investigations". This marked a new beginning to tackle terrorism as a "collective threat" in the Indo-Pak equation. It was a bold step to move beyond finger pointing through media and engage directly through an institutional framework. The first meeting of Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism (JATM) was held in March 2007 in the backdrop of the tragic Samjhautha Express incident and defined the parameters of bilateral anti-terror cooperation. This meeting defined the framework of the mechanism and agreed that specific information to be exchanged for "helping investigations on either sides related to terrorist acts

and prevention of violence and terror acts in the two countries. The second meeting was held on October 22, 2007. Though both sides continued with accusations but still there was a movement forward. And in the third meeting of the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism held in Islamabad on June 28, 2008 in the backdrop of the Kabul blast of Indian Embassy, both sides exchanged fresh information about terrorism incidents including Samjhautha Express. They reviewed the steps taken on the information at the earlier meetings.

This, however, could not last long as the Mumbai blasts in 2008 ripped apart every initiative between the two countries. As Congress is shouting over the inclusion of an ISI officer in the JIT, the UPA government had invited Director General of ISI following the Mumbai attacks. All the three meetings of JATM reiterated the need for combating terrorism but no tangible solution came up. Both sides, however, continued their efforts to bring a change in halted process. When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met his Pakistani counterpart Yusuf Raza Gillani in Sharm el Sheikh on July 6, 2009 they returned to same language as of Singh and Musharraf. “Both leaders agreed that terrorism is the main threat to both countries. Both leaders affirmed their resolve to fight terrorism and to cooperate with each other to this end. Both leaders agreed that the two countries will share real time credible and actionable information on any future terrorist threats,” read a joint statement with special reference to bringing to the book the perpetrators of Mumbai attacks.

Looking back at the events that have shown up and down in the relations between the two countries and their commitment to put an end to cross border terrorism, the visits vis-a-vis Pathankot terror attack have set a new standard in this mechanism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s surprise visit to Lahore on December 25 last made a beginning of a new raproshma and given the “comfortable level of dealing” on both sides the process of talking to each other has sustained. Both National Security Advisers Ajit Doval and Lt Gen (Retd) Janjua have laid a foundation in Bangkok and that seems to be working. New Delhi and Islamabad have surely embarked on a new path of giving concessions to each other from UFA summit where Kashmir was deleted and the recent meeting of Hurriyat leaders with Pakistan’s High Commissioner Abdul Basit, which did not see any objection from Modi government, are some of the indicators that they will move on despite the

criticism. The visits of joint teams mark a positive beginning and it must be followed.

Violating the ceasefire again, 2016

A shocking incident on November 1, along the Line of Control and the International Border in Samba district of Jammu and Kashmir has come as a grim reminder of the cost of the conflict between India and Pakistan. Seven civilians including two children were killed when Pakistani Rangers opened fire, and accordingly the Border Security Force used 82mm mortar shells to “settle scores” with their counterparts from the Indian side. Pakistan officials reported that six civilians have been killed on that side as well. On October 31, Pakistani officials said a woman was killed in firing from the Indian side.

There is thus, virtually no ceasefire to speak of between India and Pakistan even though one was agreed upon in 2003 and had worked well for a long time. Both sides have displayed patience over the years and eschewed the practice of firing at each other randomly and at will. Skirmishes did routinely take place across the border. But tensions escalated after the September 18 attack on the Indian army’s Uri brigade headquarters in North Kashmir. As a result of this fresh round of hostilities, the ceasefire has been set-aside over the last few weeks. These strikes claiming civilian lives from both the sides are perhaps the worst ones so far. It has also forced thousands of people living along the Line of Control and the International Border to leave their homes.

As this was unfolding, the Narendra Modi government struggled with the compulsions presented by Kashmir and domestic pressure. In response, it claimed to have conducted surgical strikes in the Pakistani side of Kashmir on September 30 to target a militant base across the border. The claims were followed by denials but the net result was that after September 30, 80 ceasefire violations have been reported with intensified shelling and firing from both sides. On the Indian side, twelve army and Border Security Force men have been killed, in addition to four civilians. Forty-two people were injured. Even yesterday the exchange of fire was on across the LoC.

When the ceasefire was declared in 2003, hundreds of thousands of people heaved a sigh of relief and returned to their homes after a decade of

a stand-off between the two countries. Now, we seem to have returned to a similar situation. People have either run to seek shelter in the hinterland or are living a life of panic in their bunkers. For India and Pakistan it may be like a game of Twenty20 cricket in which they can boast of how many losses they have inflicted on the other side, but the people on either side are suffering. They yearn for the golden period that lasted from 2003 to 2007.

The political climate on both sides is not conducive to any moves towards reconciliation. Pakistan is bracing for a transition at the top-most level in the army amid civil-military acrimony. In India, the BJP is facing a crucial election in Uttar Pradesh early next year. Campaign posters sporting images of the surgical strikes against Pakistan have already appeared, thus giving more oxygen to this hostile outlook.

The ceasefire worked well for a long time and its benefits were tangible on the ground. Tens of thousands of people living along the 725-kilometer-long LoC returned home to live in peace after a long time, with the rapprochement paving the way for a grand reconciliation. This took the shape of historic moves such as the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawlakot bus services, thus altering the status quo between the two parts of Kashmir. This not only created a space for further talks, but also instilled a feeling among the people that the divided state had a chance of being united at least at the symbolic level. These bus services were a godsend that provided the much-needed relief to the people who had been caught in the shelling and to divided families who had not seen their near and dear ones for nearly six decades.

It was during this time that the foundations were laid for a breakthrough by the then Prime Minister AB Vajpayee and former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. It was carried forward in Dr Manmohan Singh’s regime. This new phase of normalcy, if not friendship, emerged against a backdrop of a near war-like situation in the wake of the parliament attack of 2001. This goodwill was, however, derailed by the Mumbai attack in 2008, which restarted the cycle of instability in Pakistan. But with the return of Nawaz Sharif to power and his commitment to peace moves aimed at better relations with India, hopes for an end to the enmity had revived.

PM Modi did show his intent to revive the process first by inviting Sharif to his oath-taking ceremony and later by visiting Lahore on his birthday. But then Pathankot happened and the continued violence in Kashmir was

attributed to Pakistan. New Delhi arbitrarily called off the foreign secretary talks in 2014. The National Security Advisors even covered some ground but the deep-rooted suspicion on both sides prevented permanent engagement.

Today, it is a challenge for New Delhi and Islamabad to deal with those who are against peace. Extremist elements on both sides are worried about becoming irrelevant if there is any success in the dialogue between India and Pakistan. Hawks in India are working overtime to ensure this and extremists in Pakistan may also have effective ways of discouraging the process. It is in the interest of the people that both New Delhi and Islamabad show grit and forge ahead to restore relations and start talking Kashmir. Only this can silence the guns on the border, as the stakes of peace lovers will automatically go up. On November 23, the ceasefire will complete 13 years and both countries must take steps to see that it is re-implemented in letter and spirit.

After effects of assembly elections in five states, 2017

All eyes are set on today's election results in five states including the Uttar Pradesh that is seen as a deciding factor for future prospects of not only the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but also the person of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The political situation that will unfold after the results are declared will have an impact on internal as well as external political dynamic. Ahead of the declaration of results, there seems to be some "positive" movement vis-à-vis the battered relations between India and Pakistan. For last over a year both New Delhi and Islamabad has been at loggerheads not only within the region but they took this battle vociferously to United Nations as well. While India got a handle with September 17 attack on an Army base in Uri to castigate Pakistan, the latter went to the international body with the load of human rights violations that took place during unprecedented unrest in Kashmir in the summer of 2016. Consequently, things did not improve and the war of words continued unabated.

However, new doors have been opened with the two countries sending signals about the resumption of dialogue process, though not in a formal way, in near future. New Delhi not opposing the Pakistani diplomat Amjad

Sial's appointment as new Secretary General of SAARC is an indicator in that direction. Earlier India had put up resistance to his appointment. Similarly, the agreement on holding bilateral talks on Indus Water Treaty in Lahore on March 20 is very significant, not only in the sense that both countries have agreed to resume talks on the subject but New Delhi has expressed its desire to sort out Indus Water issues bilaterally rather than through the intervention of a third party. There is a caveat however, as New Delhi has maintained that it should not be construed as resumption of dialogue process with Islamabad. That is understandable as the elections were under way and ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has in the last two years frequently upped the ante against Pakistan using the phrase "talks and terror cannot go together". New Delhi's unremitting demand has been that those involved in 2008 Mumbai attacks should be brought to justice and that Islamabad should turn off its tap of aiding and abetting "terror" directed at India.

By and large the hostilities between India and Pakistan have scaled up in last two years with both sides toughening their stand on crucial issues. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise visit to Lahore on December 25, 2015 had opened up a new window in these relations and much was expected following informal talks he had with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif. But it proved to be short-lived as militants attacked Pathankot airbase. The fact is that New Delhi showed patience and even allowed a high level investigation team from Pakistan to visit Pathankot. That unfortunately was not reciprocated by Islamabad. It obviously pushed the relations to a dead end. In past it was unilateral cancellation of Foreign Secretary level talks by India in 2014 that made the turf difficult. But the real jolt to relations was when National Security Advisers of both countries were scheduled to meet in Delhi in August 2015 and it could not happen as ahead of that meeting the Pakistani High Commissioner Abdul Basit as usual invited Hurriyat Conference for the talks. BJP government made it a point that Hurriyat should not be invited ahead of any such high level talks between the two countries, though that had been the practice for last over 15 years.

What is happening today is not unilateral as both New Delhi and Islamabad have been taking steps that suggest something is brewing. New Delhi faced embarrassment as it had to repatriate two young boys who were

found innocent by National Investigating Agency (NIA) after they were arrested following September Uri attack and used to nail Pakistan directly. Exchanging fishermen, the contact between Directors General of Military Operations and relatively calm border on both sides offers something significant to read. Not only is the restraint on borders a positive move, but Islamabad has walked extra mile in putting restrictions on Jamat u Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed by freezing his accounts, etc. Political grapevine is that appointment of Tehmina Janjua as new Foreign Secretary and sidelining Abdul Basit who is considered as "hawk" by Indians is also a step towards creating more space of reconciliation. Similarly the new Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa has been making it clear that he wants to maintain distance from the politics. Whether it can be translated into reality that Pakistan Army will not have any say when it comes to improving relations with India on the face of it the change in its attitude is becoming visible. Moreover, Pakistan is deeply involved in dealing with extremists along the Afghanistan border and opening the front on Indian side is not seen a challenge worth taking. Nawaz Sharif government has also scaled down its pro active policy vis-a-vis Kashmir in the past one month or so.

The Indian side is also under pressure to do something on Kashmir. Those who advice the Modi government apart from routine establishment, are of the view that a political approach is must. Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti has off late been stressing upon opening the channels of communication with Islamabad to see the stability in Kashmir. She even suggested that Jammu and Kashmir should benefit from the ambitious China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) because of its proximity to the region. But those who keenly watch the strategic developments in Delhi are "concerned" about the fall out of CPEC in the region and how it could make India irrelevant in the region. Modi government's softness towards water issue and Baluchistan are also indicators on how the dynamic of "dealing with Pakistan" is showing some change.

Keeping in view those developments, a section believes that there is no alternative to talks with Pakistan. But whatever change is taking place it is not without the active involvement of Washington that is keen to broker peace between the two nuclear-neighbours. If the knowledgeable sources are to be believed, Islamabad has obliged Americans by taking action against Hafiz Saeed but has cautioned them about New Delhi's failure to

reciprocate. Those concerned over the hostile environment are also working on a possible meeting between Modi and Nawaz in June in Khazakistan where they are scheduled to attend Shangai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting. All will depend on todays results as it will determine which way BJP goes in firming its roots for 2019 general elections. However, in both cases a new wind of change is expected.

PAKISTAN

Braving threats during 2013 elections: A new dawn in Pakistan
It is indeed the time for Pakistan and Pakistanis to celebrate. Braving the threats from extremists to not to recognize the polling booth as a step to empower themselves, the brave electorate of Pakistan have shown the courage and wisdom by reposing faith in the institution of democracy to change their destiny. The fact that around 130 people (24 alone on the election day) lost their lives during the entire electoral process is a high price to pay. But keeping in view the dark times the country has gone through, it is worth it. By voting the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) to power, the Pakistani people have added a feather to the cap, as this verdict will be another first in its battered history of 65 years. After the PPP led government achieved the distinction of being the first one to complete full term in the office, this will be the smooth transition from one government to another, witnessed in the country for the first time. The unprecedented turn out, though not in few areas, also marked the resilience of the people to stand up against the menace of terrorism and showed the urge for democracy .

Pakistan has last seen democracy till 1958 when first coup was staged and not the Army but bureaucrats such as Ghulam Mohammad who served as Governor General (1951-55) and Iskandar Mirza (President 1956-58) nursed a serious anti democracy sentiment, paved the way for the coup and set a ground for Army's penchant to rule the country for most of the period of its existence. It was delivered to people in bits and pieces in the intervening periods and could not take its roots in the society.

The Verdict By sweeping the elections after passing through turbulent times in his political career, which include his forced exile, the PML (N) chief

Nawaz Sharif has strengthened the importance of alternatives in a democratic set up. Since democracy is not an event but a deep rooted process, his being on the scene also served as a trigger for people's large participation since he had ruled the country before as well. However, the emergence of cricketer turned politician Imran Khan cannot be ignored in lending the credibility to the process of elections and pushing the youth into the electoral euphoria. Whether his "Tsunami" helped him or not but surely invigorated a new spirit among the Pakistanis who craved for a change. Imran did not fail in his efforts at all rather he has an opportunity to learn lessons to factor in the process in a more expanded manner. From one seat in 2002 election to 28 in the National Assembly this time, he has covered a long distance in the political space. On the top of it, his party is making a debut in government formation by taking over the reins in highly volatile Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province.

However, the disturbing feature of the result, which could threaten the balance of power, is that the election has by and large regionalized Pakistan. While Nawaz has swept Punjab, PPP and MQM have been confined to Sindh and Imran Khan has majority in KPK signaling that ethnicity has also played a major role. As rightly put by former PPP law maker Farhanaz Ispahani, the democracy has won in Pakistan but the federation has lost. But for that matter regionalism is also a permanent phenomenon in a strong democracy like India where the regional parties play as king makers in federal set up.

The results have reflected another important reality, which is that the parties, which have been fighting elections purely on religious ideologies, have been routed and rather rejected by the electorate. It is true that that Nawaz Sharif's proximity with right wing extremists has helped him to romp back but the hard-core religious parties have not been able to register their presence in the electoral battle. For example Jamat e Islami could not get more than three seats and many of its members fought elections in KPK on PTI tickets to ensure their win. At the same time, the parties with nationalist agenda like in KPK and Sindh too have been defeated by the people. It is beyond doubt that PPP lost due to anti incumbency and lack of leadership but the threats issued by Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan forcing it

and other two parties – ANP and MQM to restrict their movement have hugely benefited PML (N) and PTI is registering their victory.

The Challenges While Nawaz Sharif has created a wave of hope and positive movement forward, he will have to deal with plethora of problems. Both on external and internal front, his challenges are manifold. His soft approach towards extremist forces will further complicate his course on fighting back terrorism. It will be a testing time for Nawaz Sharif to ensure internal stability by stamping out the menace of terrorism while continuing to be friends with right wing extremists. He will surely be under pressure to even "compromise" on critical issues. His acid test will be to get Pakistan out of unprecedented energy crisis, which has plunged the country into darkness. Worsening economy is another major challenge he will have to deal with. But all these things are conditioned with the restoration of order and sense of security in the country.

The external front is too heavy for him to shoulder. As the international forces are scheduled to withdraw from Afghanistan there is more than a year for that to go and till then the dealing with United States of America will be a precarious situation for him. Stopping the drone attacks will not be an easy task for him as the trust between Washington and Islamabad is at the lowest level and would need a lot of home work before they could stitch the torn patches. The post 2014 situation in Afghanistan also throws up a test for him and dealing with Kabul will not be so easy. Then Indian presence in Afghanistan will be another area, which will be keenly watched by anti India forces in Pakistan. In the backdrop of his repeated statements that Army has to be under the civil authority, his relationship with this most important part of the establishment is not an easy going affair. He might have matured in his thinking and handling the sensitive area like this but the way the Army is deep rooted in the affairs of the country, he may not be able to make them subservient so easily. But Army has shown exemplary sense of responsibility in helping the state to go through this historic transition and to sustain that intent would be crucial to democracy in Pakistan.

India-Pak relations Both Nawaz Sharif and his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh seem to have started the new chapter on a positive note

by exchanging the wishes and promises. Nawaz emphatically stated that he was keen to pick up the threads from 1999 initiative when he invited then Prime Minister A B Vajpayee to Lahore. But there is difference between 1999 and 2013. He extended an olive branch to New Delhi much before his victory was clear. This was reciprocated by Dr Singh who invited him to India and soon followed Sharif's desire to see the Indian Prime Minister attending his oath ceremony. This could be the well beginning but to sustain the momentum of the relationship is a herculean task for both the leaders. On the Indian side the level of animosity has not come down as the incidents of LoC skirmishes and the death of Sarabjit Singh are still ruling the minds of the people, "militarized" their minds and have expanded the constituency of "hatred" against Pakistan. Dr Singh is not a powerful Prime Minister who could jump to a new bonhomie as he is under tremendous pressure from opposition for other reasons as well. Nawaz Sharif may get support for opening up the new channels with New Delhi, but the general elections in India next year will put a cap on such an effort and he will have to wait for the next government to bring real change in the relationship. He is keen to push the trade with India to address an important constituency in his Punjab bastion but it will require an equal response from India, which is unlikely to happen in this regime.

Kashmir On Kashmir, Nawaz Sharif's party's manifesto was more than clear when it says on its Page 82 "Special efforts will be made to resolve the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, in accordance with the provisions of the relevant UN resolutions and the 1999 Lahore Accord and in consonance with the aspirations of the people of the territory for their inherent right of self-determination". But soon after the results he softened his stand saying that he was ready to abandon the UN Resolutions in case India agrees to Jammu and Kashmir as dispute. That is perhaps the right way to begin the dialogue but back home will he be able to sell this preposition? Then there will be no difference between Musharraf and him. Giving concessions to India will be a big decision and in case New Delhi does not reciprocate that, his trouble is imaginable. But when Nawaz says that he would start from 1999, then he is discounting the progress made between two countries during Vajpayee-Musharraf and Musharraf-Manmohan time. There was tremendous movement forward in the shape of CBM's and other initiatives

and it is not possible to ignore that. For Kashmir those initiatives were remarkable and if Nawaz really means to address Kashmir he will have to start from Musharraf left it.

Challenges before Nawaz Sharif, Sep 2013

Smooth transition of democracy in Pakistan in May had raised the hopes of stability in a country that has been grappling with militant extremism for more than 12 years now. With Nawaz Sharif coming back to power for a record third term, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led government too had set the record of first ever democratic government completing its term in office, albeit with many ups and downs. However, setting the traditional power center of Army aside and braving the threats of terrorists, Pakistani people had reposed faith in the ballot. Nawaz came to power at a time when Pakistan was going through tough times. Not so good relations with its traditional cold war time ally United States of America, renewed hostility with the bitter neighbour India, looming threat of destabilization at the hands of extremists such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), bad economy and growing unemployment were some bullet points of bad legacy he inherited from the PPP government.

However, his returning to the saddle was significant in many ways that is why it invigorated hope about a "better" Pakistan. Since an Army General ousted him, Nawaz's return through a democratic process was more than symbolic. The PPP led government had failed to overcome the heap of problems and continuously remained under attack from all sides. But Nawaz was considered to be close to the forces where from the extremism has taken birth. His and Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf were only two parties, which were spared, in deadly attacks during the elections. So there was subtle message that Nawaz was "acceptable" to them. Before his election, Pakistan was divided in fighting the terrorism. PPP government had left everything to Army and it allowed itself to be under threat. This created a gap in the decision making thus continuously taking a huge toll in Pakistan.

Peace Moves So Nawaz Sharif's efforts to inch towards reconciliation with TTP were on expected lines. Since TTP has major base in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where PTI is in power, both Pakistan Muslim League (N)

and PTI were almost on same page. The resolution passed on September 9 in All Parties Conference in Islamabad, in which even Balouch nationalists took part, had set out an agenda for peace talks with TTP. Both PML (N) and PTI are believed to favour sympathetic disposition towards militancy. That is why the APC agreed to unconditional talks with TTP. They were referred to as "our people".

However, much before the talks could begin, TTP upped its ante and killed a Major General, and an accompanying lieutenant colonel and a non-commissioned officer besides 16 other people in a deadly attack on September 15 in Malakand division. While both the civilian government and Army was yet to come out of that shock, a week later they hit a Church in Peshawar killing nearly 80 Christians after a Sunday service. The Peshwar attack is significant for two reasons. One that this minority was targeted after 11 years, the last wave of blasts hitting their institutions was seen in 2002, soon after the September 11 attacks in US. The other one that shortly after the attack, Nawaz Sharif was scheduled to head to New York to attend the UN general Assembly. So the successive attacks within a week, has created more opponents for talks with TTP rather than widening the scope of reconciliation.

Nawaz Sharif is surely on back foot as he will have to explain this "tragedy" to Americans and also will have to convince his Army back home. Army did not react to Malakand attack in view of civilian government's keenness to go ahead with peace efforts, despite the provocation. Not only would be Army unhappy over these developments, but there are Independent voices which have shown concern over this long rope the PML (N) has extended to TTP. Many believe that it was "unconstitutional" since TTP does not respect the Pakistani constitution. "It is settled principle that the authority vested in state functionaries is the authority delegated to them by people and must be exercised as a sacred trust within limits prescribed by constitution," Babar Sattar, a senior lawyer, wrote in Dawn.

TTP does not believe that it has to lose anything even if talks fail as they draw their strength from societal roots based on religious denominational linkages, anti-US feelings and failure of government to offer an alternative

to militant narrative. In both ways they are in a winnable situation, but government is destined to lose its face .

Change Of Guard Another major challenge Nawaz Sharif is facing is to who will be the next Chief of Army Staff since General Ashfaq Parvez Kiyani is retiring in November. Government has discounted the reports of an extension to him. Although Kiyani becoming the National Security Adviser is not ruled out, the moot question is, whether the transition in General Headquarters (GHQ) would be smooth. Grapevine is that Nawaz Sharif would go by seniority. Precisely to ward off any controversy or pressure about the new choice, he has kept the Defence portfolio with him. But in Pakistan it is not that easy for a civilian ruler to choose the new Chief without any major hurdle. Past experiences have shown that both Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif fell victims to their own choice, even after ignoring the seniority when they picked up Zia ul Haq and Parvez Musharraf respectively.

This time, however, the case is becoming stronger for following seniority to lend stability to procedures. This time, he has two important posts to fill. Besides COAS, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC), equally a coveted post is also falling vacant in October. But the decision to choose the successor of current CJCSC Gen Khalid Shameem Wynne will pave way for Kiyani's successor as well. Though precedence is that Army has always held this post, this time the lots may fell on Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Asif Sandilla. In that case General Haroon Aslam is the senior most General, who is likely to succeed Kiyani. But in case Army prevails on retaining the CJCSC, then Aslam may go there and the next choice for COAS would be General Rashad Mehmood, currently Chief of General Staff. But reports suggest that in case Prime Minister gives seniority a toss, then those who are in the zone of consideration include Inspector General Training and Evaluation at the GHQ Lt Gen Raheel Sharif, Corps Commander of Mangla Lt. Gen Tariq Khan, Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence Lt Gen Muhammad Zaheerul Islam and Commander XXX Corps Gujranwala Lt Gen Salim Nawaz. Lt Gen Tariq Khan is believed to be the choice of Americans but this time it is too naïve to believe that Washington can play much role in deciding the COAS.

In 108 days of Nawaz Sharif's government, terrorists have struck 109 times. With security as the prime challenge for Nawaz, economy and unemployment are also equally serious issues he is confronted with. Unemployment helps breed terrorism, as the jobless youth become fodder for seminaries to catch them young and train them for Jehad.

That is why Nawaz Sharif announced six youth specific schemes worth Rs 20 billion last Saturday to arrest the trend that would further endanger Pakistan. Political equations in Pakistan are on one side but despite a discernable feel of ease at least in Islamabad, the threat of extremism tops the list of concerns for a Prime Minister who talks peace and reconciliation.

Factories of hate On 22 September 2013, a twin suicide bomb attack took place at All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan, in which 127 people were killed and over 250 injured. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan-linked group Jundallah carried out the deadliest attack.

A few hours after a suicide bomber hit a Church in Peshawar on Sunday last, a six-year-old, chubby boy was struggling to get out of the clutches of two youngsters in a crowded Rawalpindi bazaar. Weeping and crying it was clear that he did not want to be with them. But with all the force at their command, they were dragging him while scores of people were watching the scene and some of them even giving incongruous smiles. When the boy, probably of Pathan descent, clutched to a tyre of our vehicle, I asked the duo as to why they were dragging him like this. "Yeh Madrassey Sey Baag key Aaya Hey" (he ran away from the madrassa), was the curt reply.

I could not pose another question, as they finally managed to shoulder him and he was soon out of sight. A friend who accompanied me sarcastically remarked "He is being taken to factory and may be one day he will emerge like the bomber who carried out an attack today". 'Factory' is the expression used for Madrassas in Pakistan, which churn out 'Jehadis', who have now been targeting Pakistan for more than 12 years.

I asked my friend what if the child just gets the usual religious education in the madrassa instead of joining the militant ranks. He replied: "May be he is spared, but boys like him are caught at such a young age that it does

not leave much of an option for them but to go by the direction they are given."

The threat of extremism has been eating at the vitals of Pakistan, especially after September 11 attacks on United States of America and then the so called "war on terror".

With anti-American feelings reaching a crescendo, the extremist groups did everything to destabilize Pakistan and continue to do so. More than 50,000 people have been killed in 12 years and thousands were injured and there is no let up, even as the democratic government has been in power for over five years now. If the Pakistani Army was the irritant for such forces, since they believed that they were partners in the crimes committed by US, then a space should have been given to the democratic leadership. But that is not happening. In the past few years these forces have virtually put the state on backfoot. They have twice attacked the Parvez Musharraf, while he was in office, killed the future Prime Minister of Pakistan (Benazir Bhutto) and not even spared the General Headquarters (of Army), Naval Base, many more sensitive installation and on the top of it the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) office.

The web of Madrassas in Pakistan has become an uncontrollable thing with more than one factors mixing together. Anti-US feelings, bitterness with India and the reprisals against militants, whom Pakistan prefers to call terrorists have conjured up to make a societal sanction possible for such forces. With Pakistan facing more than one problem, the influence of these Madrassas is not waning. Necessarily all the Madrassas are not responsible for providing fodder to the organisations which have targeted Pakistan for instability. But generally they come from these seminaries only. This trend is also attributed to collapse of public education system. In last 65 years, large swathes of Pakistan's territory have remained outside the control of federal government. It ranks 113th of 120 countries in literacy, with a combined men and women rate of 55 percent. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader and Member National Assembly Shafqat Mehmood told me that it was wrong to "bracket" all Madrassas in that category. "Not all Madrassas are Jihadi factories. Our party is in the process of creating a common syllabus in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to bridge the gap between different types of education systems," he noted with confidence.

According to an estimate, there are nearly 24,000 registered madrassas in Pakistan and the number of unregistered ones is growing. The number of students enrolled in these madrassas is estimated to be around 3 million. The mechanism to regulate or modernize them has failed, as they believe it was an attempt to dilute their agenda of carrying out their religious duty against the “evil”. But if the Jehad is against the evil, does Pakistan really fit in that category, as it was the nation created in the name of Islam. For many reasons, those for whom Mohammad Ali Jinnah fought to have a separate nation have turned against the same. Disdain in Pakistani society is mostly because the country could not keep its date with democracy and Army emerged the most powerful organ of the state.

When the militants carried out two attacks in Jammu on Thursday and all the TV channels were asking question as to why Pakistan was not reining in the “terror’ camps, I was amused. The government which cannot save an officer of the rank of Major General, is disempowered to stop an attack on Church, is facing daily attacks on the parts of establishment, how can it rein in such people, if at all they had come from the same stock. In Nawaz Sharif’s 108 days rule in Pakistan, militants carried out 109 attacks and the number is increasing. Only in two weeks time at least 170 people were killed in these deadly attacks. In a shocking incident on Sunday, 17 members of a family were among 40 killed when a bomb went off in a busy Peshawar market. This time, however, a slight change in rhetoric on Indian side was that the attacks in Jammu were not directly linked to have been patronized by Pakistani government .

Today Pakistan is in bad shape. Despite being soft on terror in past one year, which resulted in marginal 1.45 percent decline in fatalities in 2012 and Nawaz Sharif’s keenness to open up dialogue with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, the umbrella group of militants, situation continues to remain grim. But at political level there is support for Nawaz on handling it both ways.

“Whatever the Madrassa may or may not teach, it is the ground reality in Pakistan and Afghanistan that is the determining factor regarding violence. Extremism bordering on bigotry exists in almost every country, when it takes a violent turns, as is happening in Pakistan, then the State has to act. Promoting peace via dialogue and protecting the people from acts of violence have to go hand-in-hand,” Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed told

writer. Mushahid, who is chairman of Defence Committee, says: “Democracy is our destiny, irrespective of forces inimical to it.” But there are voices, which advocate a tough posturing.

“The proposed talks are unlikely to succeed unless the government gives a clear indication to the insurgents that it would not tolerate its writ to be challenged by anyone. We have prevaricated for too long and allowed the insurgents too much room,” a former diplomat, who has worked in Afghanistan, said arguing that a tough message needed to be sent.

As of now Nawaz Sharif’s carrot and stick policy is facing a bumpy ride, but in case all the organs of state are determined, it may succeed. However, after the recent attacks, the voices of opposition to dialogue are growing louder asking the government to retaliate. Next few months are crucial for Nawaz Sharif as he will have walk a tight rope of pushing for dialogue and also to ensure that less number of civilians are targeted. Really a testing time for Pakistan and Sharif.

Pakistan’s Kashmir dilemma, Feb 2014

When Pakistan officially observed February 5 as ‘Kashmir Solidarity Day’ Wednesday last, the atmosphere was more euphoric this time. The main reason could be the transition of power from Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) to Pakistan Muslim League (N) headed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. PPP government was not averse to Pakistan’s Kashmir cause but since it was heavily burdened with security challenges in the country, it could not devote much time towards this fundamentally important issue for Pakistan.

Except for getting the hard-core constituency involved in the renewed Kashmir ‘strategy’, though only at the public posturing level, Nawaz Sharif has also been treading a cautious path since he took over in May last year. Right from his campaigning to initial statements as Prime Minister, he did not sound belligerent vis-a-vis India. He invoked the 1999 Lahore Declaration, of which he and the former Prime Minister A B Vajpayee were the architects, to pick up the threads on the peace process. He did not come clear on Pakistan’s Kashmir policy and continued to go in circles, singing the peace tune for resolving all outstanding problems with India. However, at the same time he did not oppose any hardliner as well. Since Nawaz

Sharif owes his return to power partly to extremists in Pakistan, he continues to keep his Kashmir policy under wraps except a few pronouncements mainly when he is in Pakistan administered Kashmir (PaK). When he was quoted as having cautioned about a fourth possible war in case Kashmir was not resolved, during a meeting of Kashmir Council in Muzaffarabad, his office not only denied it but also suspended three officials responsible for the "leak".

Nawaz Sharif has left the questions on Kashmir mainly to be fielded by his Foreign Policy Adviser Sartaj Aziz and others. He tries to distance himself from making a direct or meaningful reference over Kashmir when it matters a lot. And to re-infuse official confidence on days like February 5 is no more than posturing to keep Pakistan's Kashmir constituency as well as separatists in Valley in good humour. There is no denying the fact that Pakistan is a principle party to Kashmir dispute and its involvement in final resolution cannot be ignored and is rather inevitable. But the way Islamabad has been handling Kashmir during past 65 years is full of flaws and backward moments. With reference to KSD, Pakistan's leading English newspaper Dawn observed in its editorial that the country's K-policy has all along been dominated by the security establishment. "Even as Kashmir Day was observed on Wednesday, few people realised the enormous damage done to the cause of Kashmir's freedom by Pakistan's past cultivation of non-state actors. True, some political governments were mindful of the hazards inherent in such a policy but they were helpless in the face of the military's stiff opposition to their views. The generals insisted that they alone knew how to run Pakistan's security policy. Conceding this point meant handing over to the army the gamut of security issues from Afghanistan and Kashmir to N-weapons" the paper wrote in its hard hitting editorial on February 7.

On the face of it, Islamabad has been maintaining that it was only extending diplomatic, moral and political support to Kashmir. But in reality it has been much more than that. When armed rebellion erupted in Kashmir in 1989, this challenge to Indian rule was by and large indigenous in nature even as the material support was given by Pakistan. With the passage of time, Pakistan changed its complexion and opened up the gates for external elements thus hijacking not only the movement but the discourse as well. It continues to hold key to the political discourse in the separatist camp and it

has not encouraged independent thinking on Kashmir. While it boasts about being the only benefactor of Kashmiris it has miserably failed in allowing space for a Kashmiri discourse and exerting as a genuine party.

In case Pakistan would have acted with a policy to only help Kashmir "cause", it would not have come under the "burden" of tribal raid of 1947, accepting Simla agreement "under duress", starting militancy in Kashmir and now surrendering it under the much talked about "Kashmir fatigue" phrase in Pakistan.

Biggest damage to Kashmir was caused after 9/11 when it was linked to the so-called international terror network and the real political dispute of Kashmir was defamed at the international level. This was also the result of involvement of those actors who in one or the other way owed allegiance to those who were operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan became miserably weak at diplomatic level and could not fend off the Indian offensive.

It is a fact that Nawaz Sharif did not get a positive response from New Delhi but in spite of that Islamabad continued to promote the bilateral relations through trade and commerce and showed keen interest in improving non-political relations. Today, the trade between two countries is an important area of engagement and for the sake of it, they have even sacrificed the cross Line of Control (LoC) trade which had emerged as an important Confidence Building Measure vis-a-vis Kashmir.

Pakistan may observe KSD with much fanfare but the fact is that its Kashmir fatigue is much visible in its real dealings. Policy experts and even some important functionaries in the government have conceded (in private) that Pakistan has been paying a huge price on account of terrorism in last over one decade and Kashmir is one of the reasons for that. One can empathize with Pakistan as far as its terrible internal situation is concerned though it is not mainly due to Kashmir. The flawed policy of giving in to the security establishment, as suggested by Dawn, has lot to do with Pakistan's present dilemmas over Kashmir.

There could be many more questions Pakistan will have to answer over Kashmir. However, the concern must revolve round the stability of Pakistan. Not only for peace in Pakistan, but in entire South Asia, resolving Kashmir is an unavoidable task both India and Pakistan must take up. It is expected that after a new government takes over in Delhi, both move

towards a grand goal of resolving not only Kashmir but other outstanding issues as well. Rigidity would not serve any country's interest. They should also desist from any showdown in Afghanistan, which could be detrimental for peace in the region. India's insistence for a greater role in Afghanistan is not in the interest of this peace as Pakistan has much more stakes in that country. Pakistan must also take stock of its Kashmir policy and move towards a pragmatic and sincere approach to show that it is different from New Delhi when it comes to Kashmir.

Cautious beginning by PM Narendra Modi, Feb 2015

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's surprise call to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif on February 13 once again signified the unpredictability in the relations between the two countries. When New Delhi unilaterally called off Foreign Secretary-level talks in August last year, at that time also keen India-Pak watchers were taken aback. This call too came with a little surprise though the back channel route had opened up a few weeks before when former National Security Adviser of Pakistan Mahmud Durrani had visited Delhi and met among others the Foreign Secretary Jaishankar and NSA Ajit Doval. Both Durrani and the Pakistani government denied his visit having any "official authorization". But the way things moved swiftly with Modi's call, the ground work could not be ruled out.

Pakistan PM's Adviser on Foreign Affairs and National Security, Sartaj Aziz told me in an exclusive interview that there was no back channel effort behind this. He rather referred to US President Barrack Obama's recent visit to India saying that he played a role in persuading India to re-open the stalled process of dialogue with Pakistan. However, Modi, in his inimitable style did not make the call Pakistan-specific, the way he did in May last year when he invited Sharif and all other heads of SAARC countries to his swearing-in ceremony. He almost repeated the same this time by giving it the name of "SAARC yatra" of India's Foreign Secretary. He used the ongoing cricket World Cup euphoria to pick up the threads and wished his neighbours good luck. This was surely a clever move – not to make it look as if he was really forced by US and others to talk to Pakistan.

Though the date for Foreign Secretary's visit to Pakistan has not been finalized yet, it is clear now that both the bitter neighbours will start talking

again. As Aziz maintained in the interview that it depended a lot on how the two top officials move forward, it remains to be seen whether they can jump to solutions to already “almost agreed” issues such as visa and trade. Since Sharif had felt “let down” after he attended the swearing-in ceremony against the reluctance of Army, he had hardened his stand vis-a-vis India. Comparing his February 5, 2014 speech on Kashmir Solidarity Day with this year’s speech on that day in Muzaffarabad, there was a stark difference in tone and tenor. From being a soft Nawaz in 2014, he renewed the Kashmir rhetoric by saying “Kashmir runs in my blood”. Invoking his connection with Kashmir, he told a gathering of Kashmiri leaders that he belonged to Anantnag and his wife Kulsoom’s parents belonged to Shopian in South Kashmir. He tried to build a strong bond assuring Kashmiris that he would not disappoint them.

Sharif’s change in discourse on Kashmir was also the result of mounting pressure on him from Army and the extremist constituency which had started to see him go “softer” on India. As the dialogue process is likely to take off afresh, his challenge starts now. Army has traditionally been hawkish on Kashmir except for the period when General Parvez Musharraf headed it and ruled Pakistan for about seven years. Both the countries may move forward on softer issues and there may be incremental progress but Kashmir will continue to remain a bottleneck. With Narendra Modi in power, New Delhi is unlikely to show any flexibility. For BJP, Kashmir is non-negotiable and today’s BJP is not that of A B Vajpayee, who had developed a “passion” to iron out differences with Pakistan despite its “backstabbing” in Kargil. For today’s managers of foreign policy in Modi government, Kashmir is a “local issue” as they see the problem through the prism of law and order. That is why they repeatedly talk about large turnout in elections as people reposing faith in democracy. What they ignore is that even after this large turnout, the alienation remains intact. Even an elected MLA from Langate Engineer Rashid goes to the extent of saying that his heart beats for Pakistan. When an elected lawmaker cannot reconcile with the Indian system, how can a commoner be expected to do so.

That is how the fragility of dialogue process becomes more evident. For both the countries it is about what they offer each other and what could be the take away. Pakistan’s hardening posture vis-a-vis India could further shrink the space. For the first time in last two decades Pakistan publicly

blamed India for supporting anti-Pakistan activities. “[India] is supporting terrorism in Balochistan and Fata. We have warned them at every level – political leadership, diplomacy, military… even the common man is clear about the dangerous game they are playing,” Major General Asim Bajwa, Director General of Inter-Services Public Relations recently said in a press conference while reacting to escalating tension on borders. “This is an attempt to distract Pakistan because Pakistan is heading towards eliminating terrorism,” he added. Ea rlier the Sharm al Sheikh declaration in 2004 in which India had agreed to mention Baluchistan, created a furor and the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to almost withdraw.

With such strong stated positions on both sides, resumption of dialogue surely comes as a breather. But to move forward and take the relations back to semblance of normalcy seems a bigger challenge for both the countries. No doubt that people in both countries crave for better relations and the urge to have more people-to-people contact is evident but the hostilities that have engulfed the establishments may not open up a space for reconciliation. For example, the business community on both sides is keen to take the trade forward. With 2 billion dollars formal trade, they want to convert the 5 billion dollars informal trade into the former. But the real issue is of how the governments nudge through agreements to remove even smaller impediments. As a goodwill gesture Pakistan released 173 Indian fishermen on Monday and a group of 100 Hindu pilgrims arrived in Lahore last week. They urged both countries to remove impediments. The Kashmir-centric CBMs are also hostage to whims and wishes of various agencies on both sides despite a strong desire among people to strengthen them. In this scenario it seems that governments have failed their people. This new beginning, though cautious in nature, can re-open new window for peaceful relations provided leadership on both sides is sincere in hammering out solutions, at least starting with less contentious issues.

CPEC, GB, Kashmir and Pakistan, Feb 2015

When Kashmir has started educating itself about what China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) means and how it would impact this region, a contentious issue as is apparent and linked to the corridor has popped into view and overshadowed the original debate. The issue is Gilgit-Baltistan

becoming the fifth province of Pakistan which has started dominating the political discourse in Kashmir. It was triggered by the statement made by Pakistan's minister for Inter-provincial Coordination Riaz Hussain Pirzada who told Geo News on March 15 that the committee headed by Sartaj Aziz had recommended to make GB as the province. This raised eyebrows not only in Delhi (which has a stated position) but also in Kashmir.

The focus intensified on CPEC and when Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti advocated why Kashmir can't be part of it and benefit from it, it has stayed in both the political and popular discourse. "J&K could become a corridor of economic activity in the region and the country could take huge benefit of the economic activities going on across the Line of Control. Why can't we be partners in economic growth and share the benefits of projects like the CPEC. Let us move beyond skirmishes," she said at a seminar in Delhi. Not only did she invoke CPEC as key to economic prosperity but a seminar organised by Kashmir Institute in Srinagar on March 11 evoked serious interest in the subject where experts discussed how CPEC would bear upon Kashmir as a political issue and its resolution. This evincing interest laid bare the fact as how keenly Kashmiris were watching the developments, and those were not confined to usual political reactions but to civil society and intelligentsia at large.

Before the debate could move further and provide an insight to policy makers, the issue of GB becoming the part of Pakistan proved to be a raw nerve. Pakistan did not make any clarification and perhaps wanted to send a feeler and see the reaction. But it proved to be an intense one from this part of Kashmir. Gilgit-Baltistan has never been part of any discourse in the past and even after the armed rebellion broke out in 1989 in Kashmir and Pakistani Administered Kashmir (known as Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir in India) became virtual part of it with thousands of Kashmiri youth overnight becoming the guests in homes in Muzaffarabad and elsewhere. It was declared as the base camp for "Azadi" by the militant organisations and intense involvement of its people in the struggle became visible. Even today when anything happens in Kashmir, the other side fumes and frets.

For Kashmir GB has been a far off place which had something to do with Ladakh. It was only in 2016 summer when some protests against "Indian atrocities" were reported from there. When I visited GB some ten years

back I found not much interest among people to be linked to Kashmir problem. Though happy with Pakistan, the common refrain was that they should get the state subject rights back. Even as “AJK” has been treated differently by Pakistan since 1947 in terms of constitutional and political arrangement, GB has never been considered its part. A semblance of political autonomy was only restored to the region in 2009 and it was renamed from Northern Areas to Gilgit-Baltistan.

However, the fact is that GB is part of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and its resolution is pending, interestingly according to both India and Pakistan. This is how Indian External Affairs Ministry reacted while describing GB under “illegal occupation” of Pakistan: “It has been, is and will always be an integral part of India. The entire state of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India in 1947 and any unilateral step by Pakistan to alter the status of that part will have no basis in law and will be completely unacceptable.” While it is presumed that Pakistan was under Chinese pressure to declare it as the fifth province, Beijing too jumped the bandwagon saying that it has not changed its position vis-a-vis Kashmir. ‘The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) did not affect China’s position on the Kashmir issue,’ the spokesperson Hua ChunYing said on March 17. Even if we take this on its face value the hard reality is that in case Pakistan moves ahead it would negate its long standing position it has maintained. Though it would mellow down in between and talk about “out of box” solutions but the United Nations Resolutions have served as a political bible for Islamabad in relation to resolution of Kashmir and GB cannot be isolated from that position. No doubt Pakistan has not allowed this region to be treated at par at least with “AJK” but the realities of the history cannot be altered. By taking such a monumental decision, Pakistan will be defeating its own cause and laying the foundation for a closure to Kashmir issue which will be then “settled” with the onset of CPEC.

In Kashmir both civil society and the resistance leadership have sharply reacted to the proposal. While the concerns by intelligentsia and civil society could be well understood, the reaction from Joint Hurriyat comprising Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik is interesting. This set of leadership has hardly done anything that goes against the official position of Pakistan, and if they react in such a manner in response to what Pakistan government contemplates to do it will

certainly be something different. Notwithstanding most of resistance leaders now opposing '4 point formula' floated by then President Parvez Musharraf, it was only one Geelani who refused to buy any solution on those lines: rest followed the dots. In that backdrop it might be difficult for Islamabad to go ahead with what Beijing wants them to do.

Coming back to CPEC and Kashmir, it is hypothetical to analyse the benefits it might shower on Kashmir. Everything that is connected with across the Line of Control (LoC) is conditioned with the resolution of the political issue. Even if one would look at a possibility that India would become part of CPEC, Jammu and Kashmir would continue to be the bone of contention. We have the example of cross LoC trade that is breathing only because traders want it. Otherwise if left to governments on both sides it would have been closed. When started in October 2008, it was the outcome of political compulsions. If at all any economic prosperity is envisaged it can only be possible by creating free economic zone on both sides as suggested by former President of Kashmir Chamber of Industries and Commerce Mubeen Shah in a comprehensive paper on the subject. Keeping their political egos in cold storage for sometime both India and Pakistan can do a great service to their people by letting economics take lead that eventually would help creating a situation for political resolution. Looking at CPEC benefits in this situation is day dreaming. With GB issue entering as yet another bone of contention into the vexed issue, nothing can be expected unless India and Pakistan seriously move forward to talk on Kashmir and also talk with Kashmiris.

Security and new walls in Pak, Mar 2015

I have been traveling to Islamabad almost every year since 2011. Fear and sense of insecurity was writ large a few years back. Passing through diplomatic enclave and the area where Parliament, Supreme Court and PM House are located was an uphill task. But today there is semblance of relief even as two major attacks took place in Lahore and Islamabad when I was there in third week of February. In 2011, I hadwritten that it was easy to enter 15 Corps headquarters in Srinagar but difficult to get in smoothly into Serena and Marriott hotels in Islamabad, even if you are staying there as a guest. Today, the situation has eased to an extent. Friends say that Zarb-e-

Azab and National Action Plan (NAP) against extremist militants have worked and an estimated 1800 militants have been eliminated since the launch of operation. There is an air of change in the capital.

However, a new dimension that one could see in the security situation is that after December 16 attack on Army School in Peshawar, the security around schools has been scaled up. The height of walls has gone up and it was like déjà vu to see concertina wire as an added layer to the security of schools. Police patrolling around all schools has also been increased. Embassies have also doubled up the security. Still the fear is not as palpable as one could see three years back.

Valentine's Day On February 14, Islamabad was bubbling with V-day activities. Shops meant for selling the heartto-heart gifts were well decorated. Red roses, greeting cards and all other accessories could be seen as imposing impact in the markets generally flirted by the elites. In Universities one could see young boys and girls huddling on the benches, exchanging pleasantries and enjoying the day. There was no sign of resistance to this event in the country that is seen more as an Islamic/extremist country. In fact a group of friends had organized the lunch on that day at the "Dhaba" outside the Quaid-e-Azam University. They had come with roses and in full public view; the day was given its due. Onlookers, mostly bearded men had no problem at all. "Is it a routine here on VDay?" I asked. "Yes, whosoever wants to enjoy there is no problem" I was told. But this may not be true in the rural areas. Cities like Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad has fully-loaded V-days. Though there is resistance from religious groups, those who want to celebrate it are not stopped forcibly .

Nehru, Temple and Gurdawara Saidpura is a village in the heart of Islamabad. Located on the slopes of the Margalla Hills and off the Hill Road to the east of Daman-e-Koh, it was almost a forgotten part till former president Pervez Musharraf rediscovered it in 2006. After it has been re-done it gives visitor a view of multiculture heritage, the place once boasted about before 1947. Besides chain of restaurants and sitting places, it has a museum that has a fine collection of pictures depicting beginning 1960s when Islamabad was chosen as the new capital. The in charge boasts about

a temple and a gurdwara that continue to be in good shape though without any worshipper. They are well maintained. Among the pictures, he points out to one in which Pandit Nehru is sitting with President Ayub Khan getting an overview of master plan for the city.

One can find a treasure at the museum at Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization at Qaudi Azam University. A scholar at Institute Rukhsana Khan tells me that this museum has some priceless things and these have been evacuated from different places. The scholars continue to work on many aspects of civilization since Taxila and Mohenjo-Daro are in Pakistan.

Haider Despite ban by the Pakistani government, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* is popular among many Pakistanis I know. They wonder why the government banned it since the movie portrayed the "repression" and "torture" of Indian state in Kashmir. Some of my friends were curious to know how Haider passed the test of Censor Board, as "this is the best one could get from Bollywood". "With new Board in place we can't have such movies now" I responded cynically. One scene that many reminded me of was when the "Kashmiri in the film" doesn't enter his home for about a minute as he is used to frisking. "That was very powerful," a friend said. Indian movies are very popular in Pakistan, but those who know something about Kashmir miss this one most .

Khadi brand This time everyone I met in Pakistan was talking about "Khadi". This is new brand that has entered the shopping delight of Pakistan. It is fast overtaking Junaid Jamshed, Bonanza, Gul Ahmed and others, though Gul Ahmed and Breeze continue to inspire the women folk. But whosoever wanted to guide me this time for buying a Kurta, the call was for "Khadi". Otherwise I am used to Bonanza "Shalwar Kameez" (Khan Suit) or at the most Junaid Jamshed, whose quality is fast deteriorating. This time, however, I trusted my friends and made Khadi as choice. Let me see how it will work and I will have to wait till summers arrive in Kashmir.

New Metro A new metro is under construction in Islamabad. One thing important to note is that in road infrastructure their quality and speed of work is unparalleled. Lahore-Peshawar motorway, built by Nawaz Sharif

during his first tenure, is a marvel in itself. Similarly, his brother Shahbaz Sharif made a metro line in Lahore in record time during his previous tenure. Now Nawaz has taken up the metro line for bus service and this 25 kilometer long project is to be completed in record 10 months. The line will connect Pindi Saddar with Constitution Avenue through Murree road and will help the traffic to decongest. But people complain that it has as of now disturbed the ambience of the city.

TV channels One thing about which I have always been curious is why the prominent anchors are switching TV channels so often. Answer lies in good package that comes with every new channel coming on the scene. The number is increasing. Now Channel 92 is new addition. Bol is on way and the competition goes on to grab higher TRPs. Obviously, sensationalization plays an important role in electronic media. Thanks to Pervez Musharraf that Pakistan has the TV boom but they hardly remember him for good things.

Kashmir and Pakistan's predicament, Feb 2016

This year's Kashmir Solidarity Day observed on February 5 in Pakistan was different from last year if one looks at the state's position vis-à-vis Kashmir issue. Contrary to the opinion of a section of columnists (including Syed Nazir Gilani of Rising Kashmir) who believe that it rejuvenated Pakistan's resolve towards the complex issue in a more vibrant manner, there was stark difference between the two speeches made by Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan Administered Kashmir. In respect of Kashmir, his stand can only be considered as state position and the usual rallies and seminars that mark the day are not any addition. In entire Pakistan the day is being observed as a holiday for many years now. Not only does the government sponsor many programmes but the political and even militant organisations make their presence felt.

It is important to look at the crux of the speeches made by PM Sharif on this day in 2015 and 2016. On February 5, 2015 he addressed the joint session of "Azad Jammu and Kashmir Assembly" in Muzaffarabad and called Kashmir as the "jugular vein of Pakistan" stretching the emotions further by adding, "Kashmir runs in my blood". He accused India of not

being sincere in meaningful talks with Islamabad by adopting dillydallying tactics in resolving the longstanding dispute. “Kashmir runs in my blood and it has a special attachment with the land as the father of the nation Quaid-e-Azam has called it the jugular vein of Pakistan,” he had said. Though Sharif maintained that dialogue can resolve the issue, his tone and tenor was manifestation of his frustration.

This year same day, PM Sharif arrived at the same venue and touched the same subject. But his body language and selection of words was in complete contrast to that of 2015. He was not rhetorical but spoke the language of reconciliation. Sharif expressed hope that Comprehensive Bilateral Dialogue process between Pakistan and India would move forward in days to come. “Kashmir issue is a test for current leadership of Pakistan and India and people of both the countries cannot prosper and progress until the lingering issue was resolved,” he said. PM Sharif made a significant mention that his government would cooperate with India on all issues including that of rooting out terrorism. As against his angry speech on last year’s KSD, this year he did not even reiterate Pakistan’s long standing stated policy vis-à-vis Kashmir issue.

This change obviously has come with the renewed bonhomie that began with the surprise visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Lahore on December 25, last year. As both leaders agreed to continue with the comprehensive bilateral dialogue, Sharif surely does not want to do anything that would harm the relations even though Pathankot attack has dealt a huge setback, leading to postponement of Foreign Secretary-level talks scheduled for January 15. Notwithstanding the fact that Pathankot has temporarily hit the renewed process of bilateralism that had a surprise kick start on December 25, the two countries have not called it off. In this backdrop, the speech made by Sharif in Muzaffarabad is very significant given the importance of the venue that has been referred to as “base camp for Azadi of Kashmir” in Pakistan’s official parlance. As Sharif in his capacity as PM arrived in Muzaffarabad on February 5, it was expected he would reiterate the stated position of Pakistan vis-à-vis Kashmir. But that has not happened, except that he referred to United Nations saying that its prestige was involved.

Not only did Sharif observe a restraint in language on the day but three days before that Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs of Pakistan

parliament asked its government to not encourage calls for active support to banned militant groups in Kashmir. The committee, headed by ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) lawmaker Awais Ahmad Leghari, suggested the government to take action against “violent armed outfits” to dispel international concerns that Pakistan was not doing enough against groups involved in attacks in Kashmir. The panel suggested that Pakistan’s policy towards India should be based on four key principles – reciprocity, reduction, resumption and result. “Pakistan should continue seeking comprehensive engagement with India on all outstanding issues,” it said.

At the same time the committee recommended that Pakistan should continue to call for the resolution of Kashmir dispute as the core issue between the two countries. But that is nothing new when it comes to Kashmir being discussed by the political parties. It also recommended expansion of democratic space “by tapping into civil society voices in Pakistan Administered Kashmir as well as Jammu Kashmir and seek reduction in state-sponsored violence against Kashmiris in JK”. However, the recommendation about not encouraging violent groups is something that cannot be ignored in the context of India’s continuous demand of reining in the militant groups based in Pakistan.

While Sharif tried to tread a cautious path not to cause any damage to “engagement” with India, at the same time groups like Jamat-u-Dawa headed by Hafiz Mohammad Saeed thundered same day and organized powerful rallies in support of a violent solution to Kashmir.

A day before Sharif addressed the assembly in Muzaffarabad, Saeed was in Mirpur city of Pakistan Administered Kashmir and talked about every child of Pakistan sacrificing for Kashmir’s freedom. “If war in Kashmir further prolonged India would have to pay a heavy price for it. On the occasion of Kashmir Day I want more intensity in the freedom struggle,” asserted Saeed. He himself led a rally in Islamabad on February 5. The biggest challenge for Sharif is to strike a balance between his peace overture and to what India calls “continuously ignoring action against the likes of Hafiz Saeed and Masood Azhar”. For Sharif the advantage today is the apparent support of Pakistan Army on his engagement with India. But he also has the Kashmir constituency to address in Pakistan that not only

comprises the political parties but extremists as well who have emerged more powerful than the traditional pro-Kashmir lobby.

With the new revelation by David Headley, an accused in Mumbai 2008 attacks, he had met Hafiz Saeed and Pakistan's rejection that Masood Azhar was behind the Pathankot attack, Sharif's soft peddling on Kashmir may not help in resuming the dialogue between the two countries. As BJP government has shown resistance to continue the engagement in absence of concrete action against Masood Azhar, Saeed and company, it is unlikely that Foreign Secretary talks would resume soon. But one thing is clear that Pakistan is habitual of changing its language vis-a-vis Kashmir as per the requirements of bilateral engagement.

K-word back in Pakistan discourse, Dec 2016

On December 25 last year when Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a dramatic landing in Lahore to personally wish his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif on his birthday, it created a furor vis-à-vis India-Pakistan relations. The euphoria, however, fizzled out soon as it was followed by an attack on Pathankot air base by militants. The hopes rekindled by his personal visit were soon dashed to ground as things went back to square one. New Delhi had a reason to be angry but it still allowed a joint investigation team from Pakistan that included an officer from Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to visit Pathankot. Islamabad did not allow a similar visit from India and things have since come to a grinding halt.

This year Modi kept his date with Nawaz on his birthday though he just chose a telephone link to convey his wishes. On the face of it, the gesture by Modi is significant given the heightened level of tension between the two countries. Kashmir's five-month-long unrest further dented it with Pakistan raising its pitch at the United Nations. Within Pakistan too, Kashmir has bounced back in the discourse. For long time fatigue seemed to Kashmir taking over the government, civil society and media in Pakistan. But today it has again become part of every discussion and that too with a hardline approach. The way Kashmir faced the trauma in last five months and braved bullets to get killed, blinded and maimed, it created a huge emotional space in Pakistani society.

Notwithstanding Pakistan's initial approach towards fast developing situation in Kashmir after July 8 killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani, it later dominated every space in Pakistan society. Nawaz Sharif was forced to call for a "Black Day" to mourn the rapidly increasing number of deaths and had to harden his stand even though he was seen strengthening his peace overtures towards India. This too is a fact that the Pathankot incident and Islamabad's subsequent refusal to "cooperate with investigation" created a hawkish space in Delhi to not to trust Pakistan. PM Modi did not walk extra mile to continue with the peace moves the way he had taken everyone by surprise with his last year's Lahore visit. Violation of ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) further compounded the situation with hawks capitalizing over the out-of-gear situation that both New Delhi and Islamabad allowed to shape up in the already battered relations. Coming under pressure with Panamagate scandal, he had to follow his Army's never changing anti-India policy. However, the reality is that New Delhi also did not do anything significant to create a space amenable to resumption of dialogue.

Now that Delhi has chosen to ignore Kashmir and not even recognize the problem that compounded on the ground in last five months, the support for a peace process within Pakistan also has shrunk. Latest addition to this is the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) co-chairperson and former President Asif Ali Zardari invoking Kashmir on his return to home after 18 months. Zardari without even choosing his words told his supporters that Kashmir would become part of Pakistan. Referring to recent uprising he said that Pakistani flag had become a symbol of resistance in Kashmir. Zardari's invocation is nothing but to address his constituency since Kashmir had made a comeback. For many years Kashmir was missing from the electoral politics of Pakistan, and in 2013 also no party used the K-word during the campaign. It was the internal situation, terrorism and corruption that dominated most of the electioneering that brought Nawaz Sharif back to power. Except for the Army, Kashmir fatigue was very much visible in this discourse. With a stalemate on Kashmir between India and Pakistan, it has made its comeback possible with Nawaz Sharif also talking vociferously at the UN in September and declaring Burhan Wani as new hero of Kashmiris. The uprising set out a competition between the political parties who are surely going to use it in future as well. Zardari's son Bilawal Bhutto too

used Kashmir during the elections that coincided with the start of uprising in Kashmir after July 8 this year.

PPP has its own history of hardline stance on Kashmir and that has not changed much since its inception. Many analysts have concluded that Kashmir played a role in emergence of PPP when its founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto opposed the then Pakistan President Ayub Khan's agreement in Tashkent with Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri that focused on Kashmir. Differences led to Bhutto's ouster as Foreign Minister and little before that during 1965 war he had talked about fighting a 1000-year-long war with India. Bhutto's legacy was continued by his daughter who though tried peace time with Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister of India, forcefully pursued Kashmir. It was during her reign that Organisation of Islamic Conference created a contact group on Kashmir and Hurriyat Conference got an observer status. Zardari's assertion on December 23 echoes with Benazir's outright rejection of the idea of an "Independent Jammu and Kashmir", the thought dominates today's Kashmir. It was, however, the bonhomie between India and Pakistan, though less focused on Kashmir, which had forced the political parties in Pakistan to mellow down on Kashmir rhetoric.

Today a strong pro-Kashmir movement has been regenerated in Pakistan and an equally anti-Kashmir constituency is prevailing in India. This situation has once again given away the space to those who believe and pursue the idea of violence to resolve Kashmir. Societal pressure that evoked emotional support to Kashmir in the wake of recent uprising has also forced Pakistani parties to toe a hard-line. In these new times, Pakistan is not far away from Kashmir as whatever happens here it gets transmitted within seconds. Pellet gun injuries made a huge impact in Pakistani society through social media even as Kashmir has been reeling under trouble for long time. Technology has brought the picture closer to every Pakistani home, as put by a journalist friend in Islamabad and "it certainly makes the difference to understand Kashmir of 1990 and 2016".

In this backdrop Modi's call is just a formality that would not help both sides to pick up the threads on a dialogue process. Need is that people as well as political parties shun their rhetorical approach and think out of box. But that does not seem to be possibility in near future as India prepares for elections in four crucial states in next three months. BJP will have to

formulate a policy that will focus on Pakistan to garner support in elections and as a result will further strengthen the extremist elements in that country. For the time it will be extremists on both sides who will have a field day.

KASHMIR

Myth of ISIS and Kashmir

After devastating floods last month, September 2014, Kashmir is again on the media radar particularly the TV channels. This time the discussions revolve round the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) also known now as Islamic State (IS) and its “potential” connection with Kashmir. Their coverage in floods was lopsided one and in this case also the argument is full of belligerence. As if the analysts have rightly dissected the real cause of disenchantment in Kashmir, they try to be looked as the final word on this subject as well.

No doubt that some isolated incidents of IS flags being seen Srinagar have taken place and may even repeat in future as well. But that does not in any case indicate a situation that is being projected by the media. IS is an ideology that is rooted in the one, espoused by Al Qaeda. Their slow march in Syria and Iraq stunned every one and the prowess with which they “conquered” the areas and vowed to “cleanse” them of whom they think were infidels is surely something that concerns all stake holders. But the moot question is why IS would head to Kashmir? And how an International terror network can mobilize itself in a place that is highly militarized and according to government claims “free from militancy”?

In the past 25 years of insurgency, there is not a shred of evidence that would suggest that any international terror network has a direct connection in Kashmir. Except that the organisations such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish e Muhammad are ideologically close to Al Qaeda and Taliban, they have operated independently in Kashmir. Those noise about IS in Kashmir is akin to that of the “concerns” flagged by top commanders of Army a year and a half back. Suggesting that the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan will have an impact on Kashmir, they failed to cement the argument as to how Taliban would be interested in Kashmir as the next battlefield. How come Afghanistan would remain stable after the withdrawal and then the Taliban cadres would find some other destination as a sporting field. And what could be the objective of Taliban in engaging with the Indian Army in Kashmir. This was perhaps done to legitimize the disproportionate presence of Army in Kashmir and the continuation of controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

Similarly the clamour over the possible threat of IS in Kashmir is an over estimated issue. Flag hoisting needs to be simply seen in the backdrop of the anger that runs deep in the blood of Kashmiri youth. This is manifestation of the alienation they harbour towards India for long time and the same TV channels have been ignoring that as “subversion”. It is mischievous on part of the TV

channels to repeatedly re-energise the debate around ISIS and show the flags that have originally been seen fluttering in Syria and Iraq. By way of giving it the hype, the TV channels are not doing any good to the Indian nation or their pseudo nationalistic rather jingoistic agenda. Like what they did during the recent floods by terming Army and Air Force as “angels” dropping from air to rescue marooned Kashmiris, this will also result in provoking the youth to do something, which they may in reality not want to do. One can easily conclude that this may be working mechanism to engage rather push the Kashmiri youth towards this ideology by repeatedly branding them as part of the same. By all standards of media discourse that has shaped so far it is not difficult to smear a conspiracy to push Kashmir towards yet another phase of trouble and putting the real issue under the carpet.

Army, NDRF and Air Force did rescue thousands of people (though we are now told that they are going to charge us) but the way media projected it as a grace (ehsaan) on people of Kashmir created problems for them on the ground. Even during floods we have seen that how the Army faced resistance in the rescue operations as the locals did not identify them as “their own Army”. Deep sense of political alienation surfaces every then and now. From 2008 to 2010, the public unrest stands testimony to that. More than 120 people were killed in Police and CRPF firing but the people especially youth have not given up and even in a water-locked place they could challenge the Armed Force without caring about the vulnerabilities they were caught in. Kashmiris showing their solidarity with Palestinians or even mourn Saddam Hussain’s excution, without knowing as to who they are only brings to the fore the political dissatisfaction they have. They can easily fall prey to alignments based on religion, without necessarily getting actively involved in any such network. When they (youth) resorted to armed rebellion this was the reason. The insurgency was taken over by foreigners, they slowly side-stepped, only to get their struggle out of any “foreign color’.

Today when we see IS flags we rant here and there. But this is result of decades old policy of ignoring political aspirations people have on ground. This kind of an activity does not in any case reflect the Kashmiri political standpoint but it surely tells a lot about the anger against the system and the alienation towards Indian mainstream. He wants to articulate this through any means. Even the demands for water and power ultimately lead to pro-Azadi sloganeering. That means the sense of political disempowerment is deep rooted and no packages have helped in the past to change that. Discrimination in even

treating at par with any other state in case of natural calamity also strengthens the hatred a commoner harbours in Kashmir. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced Rs 1000 crore as relief but where is that. He announced that it was a National Disaster but where is the official circular. What is the policy Government of India has towards Kashmir is not known and picture is becoming grim with each passing day. The solution is in addressing the political problem rather than bracketing this in one ideology or the other. ISIS or IS can have no place in Kashmir if the genuine and rightful aspiration is understood in the right context. By pushing Kashmiris into yet another lap, the Indian media is not doing any good to its country.

False implications and nailing the lies, Jan 2015

When 46-year-old Liaqat Shah of frontier district Kupwara in Jammu and Kashmir was arrested on March 23, 2013 at the Indo-Nepal border as a "suspected" Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) terrorist, it created a furor in Kashmir. From a commoner to the then Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, the arrest was seen as a concocted story since Liaqat was returning home from the other side of Kashmir along with his family under the rehabilitation policy. The policy, announced by the government, is for the youth who had crossed over to Pakistani side of Kashmir in early 1990s who now want to return home and live a dignified life.

Amidst resistance from the Jammu and Kashmir Police that was in loop in case of his return and pressure mounted by Omar Abdullah, the case was handed over to National Investing Agency (NIA) since people's faith in Delhi Police has shattered over a period of time. Though Liaqat was granted bail, the investigations were taken up by NIA that finally exonerated Liaqat and recommended punishment for the policemen who had framed him as HM militant who was sent to guide a fidayeen attack in Delhi.

The NIA probe has surely raised the hope for those who have been jailed and condemned, unheard by Delhi Police's special cell in past over two decades. It has helped to restore faith and credibility in the institution of justice. But Liaqat's case was a unique case in which the state government took extraordinary interest in seeing that the probe is done by an elite agency such as NIA. It was perhaps about the credibility of the state itself that had unveiled the much ambitious policy for rehabilitation of youth under which more that 300 people crossed back to Kashmir through the Indo-Nepal route that is not designated as per the policy. It was an unwritten agreement between the state

and Central government and facilitated duly by the government in Pakistan, that would have come under flak from extremists for draining out the strength for a "cause that needed to be seen as indigenous". But restlessness among these youth who had been away from their families for long time was increasing and it was difficult for any government to stop them.

However, in the backdrop of Liaqat's acquittal, the larger issue that merits a debate is how scores of innocent Kashmiris have fallen prey to machinations of certain agencies particularly Delhi Police, which has been framing the young people in false and fabricated cases. When a Kashmiri is arrested or booked in such a case outside the state, it becomes extremely difficult for him and his family to get a defence. In a hostile environment that works under the smokescreen of so-called national interest it defeats the very logic of civil liberties. Even the lawyers are not prepared to take up the cases fearing reprisals from the agencies that are responsible for these false and concocted cases which finally fail the test of the law. We have seen in the past how a respected journalist Iftikhar Gilani was framed despite being known to the media corps of Delhi as a genuine scribe.

There are ample evidences that suggest how lives of many Kashmiri youth were ruined by the cops who went scot free. To cite a few examples: Only in October 2014, Delhi High Court acquitted Farooq Ahmad an engineer from South Kashmir after 18 years. He had been falsely implicated in Lajpat Nagar blasts of 1996. Mushtaq Ahmad Kaloo of New Colony, Sopore, accused of conspiring to bomb New Delhi Railway Station in 2006 was acquitted of all charges by Delhi High Court in May 2013. In November 2012, Delhi High Court acquitted Mohmmad Ali Bhat and Mirza Nasir Hussain of Srinagar of all charges leveled against them in Lajpat Nagar blast case of 1996. In April 2014, a Lucknow court acquitted Gulzar Ahmad Wani of North Kashmir along with two others in a bomb blast case of 2000 .

In a detailed investigative report in 2012, titled "Framed, Damned and Acquitted", Jamia (Milia Islamia) Teachers' Solidarity Association nailed the "lies" in 16 high profile cases and concluded that all those arrested were framed by various security agencies. Most of those framed were Kashmiris. Calling it as "proverbial tip of iceberg" the JTSA maintained that its investigation was purely based on court judgments. "We document here 16 cases in which those accused of being operatives of various terrorist organizations (Al Badr, HUJI, Lashkar-e-Toiba), arrested in main by the Special Cell of Delhi Police, were acquitted by the courts, not simply for want of evidence, but because the

evidence was tampered with, and the police story was found to be unreliable and incredulous" reads the preface of 171-page report. In its demand note JTSA had asked the government to take corrective steps to arrest this growing trend. Among other things it sought public apology from the government and the investigating agency to those who had suffered wrongful arrests, prosecution and incarceration and scrapping/disbanding of the Special Cell of Delhi Police.

Cases like that of Liaqat is an eye-opener in respect of both sides of the story. While it unravels the impunity with which the innocent youth have been framed in fabricated cases and in the manner the mechanism going without any notice so far, it also generates hope that even the sections of the system could work in bringing the justice. It is pertinent to mention that in the case of fake encounter at Pathribal in March 2000, when five Kashmiri youth were branded as foreign terrorists and burnt to death by Army in the aftermath of killing of 35 Sikhs in Chattisinghpora, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had charged five Army officers with murder. It is a different issue that they got relief from Supreme Court when the CBI's plea for trying them in civil court was rejected.

Even as it is difficult for these acquitted young men to compensate for the lost glory of their lives, but NIA's investigation has a potential to set a benchmark for justice in such cases. The circle can only be complete when the fabricators are punished under the law, which they tried to misuse apparently to get rewards and punishments. According to Liaqat's statement at least 1500 families were discouraged to return after his case. This is how the systems fail when accountability is given a damn by those who think they are above law and have protection in the "national interest".

Stark reality, grim reminder, April 2015

Amid the splendor of spring and blooming tulips, Kashmir valley suddenly erupted into a sense of desperation soon after the arrival of octogenarian separatist leader Syed Ali Geelani from Delhi. For last several years, Geelani has been spending a few months of winters in Delhi owing to his failing health. On April 15, when he was returning to Srinagar his supporters organized a reception which was attended by hundreds of people. Masarat Alam, one of his staunch followers who many believe can succeed him, was also among those who enthusiastically received Geelani.

Alam was behind bars for four years following 2010 civil unrest that claimed over 120 lives in Kashmir. But on the face of it, the new dispensation led by Mufti Mohammad Sayeed played the "gamble" and released him much to the

discomfort of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party that is in coalition with Mufti's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

Alam's presence in a rally organized to welcome Geelani did not come as a surprise. However, the pro-Pakistan slogans and waving of Pakistani flags by many of the supporters raised hackles in Delhi. When Alam was released 40 days back, at that time also the ultra-nationalist media had made it an issue and it was projected as very explosive and "detrimental" to the "national interest". The national media, particularly some news channels, questioned the state government's wisdom to release him without even respecting the observations made by the Supreme Court in Alam's case. It was in fact the infamous Public Safety Act (PSA) that was used as a revolving door to keep him in prison. At that time the media had warned the government about "dire" consequences of his release .

When pro-Pakistan slogans were raised at Geelani's rally, Alam also echoed them and obviously it became fodder for unleashing a new phase of trouble in Kashmir. The channels went ballistic building pressure on the central government to re-arrest Alam. BJP led government, which has in past taken on Congress questioning its policy vis-a-vis Kashmir, was now itself caught in a catch-22 situation. Now it was the turn of Congress to question BJP's credentials. Since the media suggested his re-arrest as the only solution, the Modi led government mounted pressure on PDP led government in the state which gave in and ordered his re-arrest almost on similar grounds that had been hanging over his head for four years.

This led to a strong reaction. Geelani denounced his arrest and also called for Tral chalo, where a brother of a Hizbul Mujahideen militant had been killed in a "fake encounter" a week before. Masarat's detention charged the already restless youth. Consequently, a protest demonstration at Narbal, in the outskirts of Narbal, was being quelled by police. It failed to see the reason of tackling them through non-lethal methods and resulted in killing of a 16-year-old boy, Suhail Ahmad Sofi. Suhail's death sparked a fresh wave of resentment and Kashmir was again on the edge. The state government did move swiftly to act against the erring police personnel, but the damage had been done. For a moment it looked that Valley, which suffered hugely due to floods in September and was limping back to normalcy, was stepping into a new phase of desperation and unrest. Record number of visitors to Tulip Garden soon faded away amid the cries and sobs of a wailing mother. Ironically, India's national media did not spend any prime time airtime to discuss the death of a teenager

the way it (national media) used most of such time when Alam was released and the Pakistani flag was waved in the rally. One may not be wrong in suggesting that a section of media was directly responsible for this situation that led to the civilian killing. Some of these over-zealous anchors have assumed the all-encompassing role— from a thanedaar to a judge— while sitting in a cosy studio in Delhi or Mumbai. No doubt media has a role to play in raising genuine concerns but the way it forces its will upon the government, it has nothing positive to offer. In this particular case both the governments in Delhi and Srinagar came under the media pressure to act .

One may not support the idea of raising the flag and slogan, but we no longer can shut our eyes to reality. Pakistan has been a factor in Kashmir since 1947. It must be kept in mind that such incidents have happened in the past and may continue to take place in future. Whether people in Kashmir are politically aligned to Pakistan or not needs to be debated but the sense of alienation on the ground is surely filled with an emotion like this. When a Pakistani national is killed in a gunfight with security forces in Kashmir, there are thousands of people who come out to give him a decent burial. This speaks volumes about how far Srinagar is from Delhi.

In Kashmir the realities are mixed. We have seen the unprecedented turnout of 70 percent in assembly elections, which according to voters was meant for governance. Political alienation is another stark reality that comes up again and again, and the outpouring like that of April-15-rally is something that cannot be ignored.

Governments and policy makers fail to recognize the changes in the period between 2003 and 2008 when Kashmir saw a relative normal time. Since two tracks of dialogue, one between Delhi and Islamabad and Srinagar and Delhi were on, people had reposed faith in that process with the hope that some credible movement was there. They did that keeping in view their transition from violence to non-violence. Since 2008, there is complete absence of political engagement. That is why a political unrest is unavoidable. Unfortunately those at the helm in Delhi fail to recognize Kashmir as a political issue. Taking the turnout in elections as the final verdict they see it as a riot-oriented and law and order issue that has time and again backfired. People in Kashmir are fed up with violence and unrest and do not want to see another generation getting consumed in uncertainty. That can only be achieved by moving forward on a path where a process akin to that of 2003 is restarted. Pakistan also needs to play a constructive role in this regard. Its threats may not

work in isolation. In Kashmir, the present government also must keep its promise of reserving the democratic space as open and the separatists need to be pragmatic in their approach. Then only we can save the precious lives like that of Suhail .

Zaffar's book and the tragedy of Jammu Muslims, June 2015

Perhaps for the first time, Muslims of Jammu are subject of a debate in Kashmir. For the last 67 years, Kashmiri leadership, scholars, journalists and academicians have not considered the political upheavals that affected Jammu Muslims as a subject worth discussion. Even after the armed rebellion broke out in Kashmir valley in 1989, which was to an extent supported by the people in Chenab Valley and Pir Panjal region, Kashmiri leadership chose not to recognize their "contribution". For long time they complained that they were not even considered for representation in All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), the conglomerate that claimed to represent the political aspirations of people of Jammu and Kashmir. Now that the separatist camp is deeply factionalized and the mainstream political parties eating into some of their space, people in Muslim majority areas of Jammu have distanced themselves from the narrative centered around the "right of self-determination".

However, in the past few weeks, Muslims of Jammu and their plight is being discussed in the separatist and civil society circles in Kashmir. And for the first time the civil society tendered an unconditional apology to them for having ignored them or failing to ensure their protection when they were massacred in thousands by Hindu fanatics in 1947 and 1948 under the supervision of outgoing Dogra ruler Hari Singh and a complacent emergency administrator Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah. The occasion to tender an apology by noted civil society member Dr Altaf Hussain was the release of the book "Kashmir Conflict and Muslims of Jammu" authored by noted journalist Zafar Choudhary. All those who represented different shades of opinion and attended the book release function echoed Dr Altaf's view in an emotional yet defiant mood.

Zafar's book in itself is first of its kind work as successive historians only made passing references to Jammu massacre. Its launch kick-started a fresh debate around the subject and stirred a thought process. The debate, however, is now linked to a grand rather sinister plan of the current government that is selectively targeting the Muslim community in Jammu region by ordering their eviction in the name of retrieving forest land. Since Forest portfolio is with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a partner in Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led

coalition, its move has gone unquestioned so far. Even the lone Muslim face of BJP in the government, Abdul Gani Kohli, has been snubbed for raising his voice over the issue. His electorate comprises mostly of those hapless Gujjars and Bakerwals who are facing the government's axe.

Not only is the eviction a matter of concern, but also the systemic way through which the Muslim officers are being replaced from key positions in Revenue, Rural Development and Education department. It conveys a lot about what is in store. In the past over a decade, polarization has become a stark reality in Jammu and Kashmir and within Jammu region; it also become evident during the elections. The one-sided mandate that became possible with communal politics played by Congress over a period and the benefit reaped by BJP in shape of 25 seats in 2014 assembly elections has threatened the balance in the region. With BJP virtually in charge of Jammu region, the government has kept its hands tied on even smaller issues. But in the larger context the government headed by PDP is not doing anything significant in Kashmir as well.

Coming back to Zafar's book, it has taken the lid off many unreported and unheard of events that have left the Muslims of Jammu vulnerable. This book is first in many ways. As mentioned earlier that no study had been exclusively focused on the plight of Muslims in Jammu especially in the backdrop of massacres that took place in 1947 and 1948, he has painstakingly researched all the angles and come to the conclusion that how 2.37 lakh people were mercilessly killed by the Hindu fanatics supported by Mahraja and even the Sikhs. Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah turning a blind eye to their helplessness is a crime that can never be condoned. The author has quoted many authentic sources and personalities suggesting that Sheikh had a personal grudge against Jammu Muslims for the fact that they did not accept him as their leader .

That is why the Kashmiri population, which for long was under the influence of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, did not consider Jammu Muslims as important factor in the resolution of the larger political tangle. Even the Srinagar based scholars and writers have long been defending Sheikh for his complacency and taking subtle pleasure in terming the majority of Jammu Muslims as collaborators. Since they were on Sheikh's side enjoying the "fruits of power", they failed to realize the sufferings of Jammu Muslims. They have been doing this without taking into account the resistance Jammu Muslims put to Sheikh Abdullah's "adventure" of converting Muslim Conference into National Conference only to further the larger agenda of Indian National Congress in

Jammu and Kashmir. It is a different issue that later the Indian leadership did not trust Sheikh and humiliated him to the hilt. In fact Jammu Muslims, whose leadership was thrown into jail by Maharaja and Sheikh's emergency administration, paid the price for resisting the 'grand Indian plan" of grabbing the state by hook or crook. Since people of Kashmir blindly followed Sheikh Abdullah they refused to see the realities across the Pir Panjal. Zafar's book has unraveled some important events in this direction.

Not only has the author put the situation in a perspective, he has talked about the mayhem (till now unheared) that was let loose on the Muslims of Rajouri and Poonch districts after 1965 war. He says that the Army under "Operation Clearance" killed over 2000 people systematically and no author has so far taken pains to detail those painful days, which triggered massive migration to Pakistan administered Kashmir. "Not a single Muslim went unaffected in both the operations ("Operation Gibraltar" by Pakistan and "Operation Clearance" by Indian Army)," he writes while quoting an elderly person in a Rajouri village.

Zafar's book is an extraordinary work on the subject as he does not end at 1965 only but looks at progressive disempowerment of Muslims in the region till 2013. Figures are self-explanatory about the representation of Muslims in key institutions when compared to their population. But an interesting example he gives, which also shows sense of accommodation on part of Muslims is about Shri Mata Vaishnodevi University (SMVDU) and Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University (BGSBU) Rajouri. Of the 98 teachers in SMVDU, funded by Hindu Shrine Board only two are Muslims, one of them from Jammu region. In contrast 25 percent of the faculty in BGBSU is non-Muslim and 33 percent of members of administration including two Deputy Registrars and Controller of Examinations are non-Muslims. BGSBU is funded by Muslim Waqf Board. Same is case with other institutions.

The book has also tried to put what many call "disinterest" of Jammu Muslims in Kashmir's separatist politics in a perspective. According to the author, this ambivalence is factored in how they have been denied a role in shaping up a discourse to find resolution for the larger political issue. Right from 1947 they, according to him, have been used as pawns in deciding the fate of the state, either through further division of the state or them being used as a vote bank by Kashmir's mainstream political parties. It is a must read for all those who want understand the dynamic of changing political landscape in the state.

Exploring the radicalization narrative, July 2015

For past few weeks the issue of radicalization among Kashmiri youth has come up again in various debates. While the National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's two-day visit was also linked with the concerns revolving around the new breed of youth joining militant ranks, waving of ISIS or Pakistani flags after the Friday prayers in Srinagar has almost become a routine. However, different narratives are shaping up about this "new change" on the ground. A section of Indian media, bound by its habit to see Kashmir developments through a particular lens, has its own theory. For them everything comes from Pakistan and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). For certain sections in Kashmir society it is akin to blowing things out of proportion. According to them it serves the "Indian purpose" to defame and discredit the "genuine freedom struggle".

Whatever the reason, truth in Kashmir has always been overlapped with vested interests vis-à-vis conflict and that too on all sides. Whether it would be appropriate to really call it radicalization – say in this case Islamic radicalization – or not, the fact is that those who resort to waving the ISIS, or for that matter the Pakistani or a green Islamic flag, only demonstrate an element of anger that is pent up for long time. For majority of Kashmiris, ISIS, more so for its barbaric actions, cannot be of much attraction. The way the stories of their brutality have been going around, an ordinary Kashmiri would never approve of it. That is why Kashmiris summarily dismiss the ISIS and its likes and see them as the "handiwork of Israel". Attributions have been the hallmark of Kashmiri psyche and if they want to dismiss or disapprove anything with logic, this is the way to do it. On top of it, the head of Hurriyat (G), Syed Ali Geelani, who undoubtedly wields more influence over the people than other separatists, he too dismisses the actions of ISIS, TTP and Boko Haram as un-Islamic. Perhaps leaders, such as Geelani, also know that in case there is even a whiff about these ideologies taking roots, they would make all others irrelevant.

To say that ISIS has attracted Kashmiri youth is to stretch it too far, though there is drastic change in the thought process of Kashmiri Muslim youth. There is no denying the fact that more and more youth are on path of becoming devout Muslims and the influence of a particular setting is taking roots. This is the trend that has been witnessed in last over two decades since their interaction with the rest of the world through new technology reached a new level. The fact is that majority of the Muslims in Kashmir still follow the traditional orientation, but those who want to follow the pan-Islamic structure are also increasing in number. That, however, does not become the launching pad for the

new phase of militancy in Kashmir. In past 20 years, more Madrasas of different orientations have come up across the Valley. But again they are unlike the Madrasas in Pakistan, which are generally referred to as “Factories for Jehad”. There is hardly any evidence that suggests that a Madrasa in Kashmir produced or influenced any militant.

The radicalization that is now seen as a concern while it manifests in the new breed of militancy, it needs to be seen in the local context. Kashmir saw the worst period of violence that began in early 1990. That was perhaps the culmination of a long-drawn political struggle and non-resolution of the dispute that has existed since 1947. Those who lead this struggle are now in denial mode refuting that large-scale rigging in 1987 assembly elections was a trigger to armed rebellion. But the fact is that it surely was a turning point as losing the faith in Indian democracy pushed hundreds of Kashmiri youth to militancy. Pakistan had since 1947 tried hard to use violence as means to wrest Kashmir from India but it did not succeed, as Kashmiris were not fully prepared to embrace violence. After 1987, the new generation of youth fancied it and the changes that were taking place in neighbouring Afghanistan after the USSR invasion made them to believe that violence only could help achieve the political goals.

But Kashmiris soon realized that this might not be the only way to get the dispute resolved. They renounced it since Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front was pioneering it and its chief Yasin Malik announced a unilateral ceasefire in 1994. Not that the others followed suit but the sign was enough that violence was not the end of the means. The transition from violence to non-violence did take place, peace process did flourish for sometime, political talking did take place but it did not end positively.

Cynicism again prevailed and with huge turnout in elections, an emboldened Delhi thought that status quo was the “best solution” with the slogan of development replacing any intent to resolve it politically. Since a vacuum was left after the failure of peace process with Pakistan following Mumbai attacks, this had to be filled by the element of frustration that was running deep in the mind of a new generation. Mindful of the fact that the status quo was becoming reality, a whole new generation of youth in Kashmir has been alienated in a greater degree than the previous one. So the radicalization, which many see as trigger to new phase of militancy and fresh recruitment, is not necessarily something that has to do anything with the extremism that is prevailing across the globe. Obviously Kashmir is a Muslim majority state and sense of

desperation surely can find a way in what is prevailing in the rest of the Muslim world. But for that the only responsible factor is the absence of political engagement. If the youth are pelting stones or waving the flags, which are not connected with Kashmir's political problem, they are finding it as a way to demonstrate their anger against the Indian state.

Unless there is acceptance of the reality on the ground, this sense of alienation may grow further with greater danger in coming days and months. Looking at Kashmir purely through the lens of law and order issue restricted to few disgruntled youth has always been a problem with New Delhi. It looks more at "managing" Kashmir rather than resolving the political issue. Kashmir's tryst with Sufi Islam has not ended but delay in political resolution is surely paving way to other forms to occupy the space. As of now the anger of youth is the manifestation of political reality on the ground. Cynics in Kashmir believe that a new phase in militancy is what New Delhi wants, but then even the conspiracy theories are proven right vis-à-vis Kashmir.

Outrage over Yakub's hanging

Yakub Memon was hanged on 30 July 2015 in Nagpur Jail. He was convicted for his involvement in 1993 Bombay blasts.

Hanging of Yakub Memon, a convict in 1993 Mumbai serial blasts, has thrown up a debate that transcends the issue of his conviction by the court and subsequent justifications from the State and those who support its stand.

Yakub's story is a curious one as he "surrendered" before Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that was investigating the case and presumably there was an "understanding" that he would get a better deal in return.

What is now clear from former Intelligence Bureau officer B Raman's unpublished article is that his landing in India was not purely an extradition. His return surely helped Government of India to reach a conclusion and implicate Pakistan that has been giving shelter to underworld don Dawood Ibrahim, considered to be the mastermind of 1993 serial blasts. If Yakub's "surrender" helped Delhi to nail Pakistan, in return he got gallows .

Whatever the circumstantial evidence and the judgment, one does respect the courts and the wisdom of the judges. But his hanging has opened up the debate on different counts. Ironically, he is the third Muslim in a row who had been executed for "anti-India and terrorist activities".

There are many more on death row with similar charges, but no urgency has been shown. In the case of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's killers, Tamil

Nadu assembly went to the extent of passing a resolution to press for their release. Likewise, there are few more from Punjab who are on death row but have escaped the gallows so far.

What has emerged, as a grave concern, after the hanging is the fear that persecution of Muslims has become a routine now and goes without questioning.

A strong section in media, mostly the TV channels, have been celebrating such events and asking for more without any consideration on the fact that there was growing resentment against capital punishment worldwide.

Here the hanging of Ajmal Kasab, Afzal Guru and now Yakub Memon has vindicated the fears of majority of Muslims that they were under persecution for last over two decades. Though there was no word of sympathy for Ajmal Kasab, who killed civilians in broad daylight and deserved the punishment, but as a matter of discussion the point is raised when the events are unfolding in this fashion.

However, a difference could be seen this time around as the outrage was stronger in many sections of Indian society as compared to Afzal's hanging in February last year. May be Kashmir is disconnected from the rest of India and the realities have not reached the general public, there was like an endorsement of his execution, though some feeble voices resented.

At that time also the media was "celebrating the death of a terrorist" though the flaws in the judicial process had been pointed out from time to time.

Given the urgency to stop Narendra Modi's march to Delhi, Congress hurried in sending him to gallows. The most inhuman part was the denial of even last-meeting with his family. It did not work and eventually Modi made it to Delhi to dismantle Congress; but Afzal had to go.

In case of Yakub, the Indian intelligentsia, some political parties, certain sections of media and celebrities came out openly against his hanging. India's most respected national newspaper 'The Hindu' wrote a strong editorial questioning the logic behind his hanging. Referring to the case, it wrote, "The President, under Article 72 of the Constitution, has the power to grant pardon, and to suspend, remit or commute sentences. To not exercise this expansive power in the service of mercy would be inhuman and unconscionable". It recalled the hanging of Afzal, saying, "In recent times, we saw the horrific judicial murder of Afzal Guru, who was hanged in secret without a final opportunity for his family to meet him, marking an unprecedented abandonment of morality on the part of the state".

Over one hundred prominent people across India petitioned the President to pardon Yakub and it did raise the bar on the intensity of how the justice was being administered selectively. Though it did not yield a positive result but the fact is that a discourse was shaped on the question as to why this man had to go to the gallows when he had cooperated and had decided to return to India against the wishes of his brother as reported in the media.

India's preeminent journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, who had taken a different line when Afzal Guru was hanged, too flashed a video editorial saying that the hanging was wrong. There were many strong voices that questioned the decision thus opening up more space to discuss the issue on the basis of one community being persecuted.

The debate was further strengthened when Bollywood celebrity Salman Khan, who is a heartthrob for millions of people in India, had to withdraw his tweet in which he had questioned the hanging. Similarly the powerful, yet a lone voice of Indian Muslims Asaduddin Owaisi too received brickbats rather death threats and bounty on his head after he vociferously opposed the execution of Yakub only because he was a Muslim.

The questions raised over his execution were supported with the argument that why the accused in massacre of Gujarat Muslims, Malegaon blasts, Mumbai riots of 1992-93 and the demolishers of Babri Masjid were going scot-free.

"I would not have any problem in case Yakub and someone involved in Gujarat massacre and demolition of Babri Masjid were hanged side by side," said a commentator.

Without questioning the judgments and merits of the case, the outrage over Yakub hanging has rung a new concern of isolation of Muslims across India.

Yakub's hanging has not only raised question for Muslims in India who did not hold back in giving the vent to their anger, but it has also brought into focus the anti-Delhi sentiments in Jammu and Kashmir, the only Muslim majority state in India.

The concerns raised over the manner in which the issue was dealt in a way have vindicated the sentiment in Kashmir that Muslims are not safe and are not treated alike in India even when it comes to delivery of justice. Rajinder Sachar committee had taken the lid off the reality of backwardness among Muslims in India a few years back but the selective justice has pushed them further to the wall and made some of them potential stock for the new dimension of pan-Islamic militant networks.

Journalists meet in the divided Kashmir, Sep 2015

When a delegation of journalists from this side of Kashmir visited Muzaffarabad recently, it reinforced the strong desire of people of both sides of Line of Control (LoC) to unite. The conference organised by Islamabad based think tank Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR) in collaboration with Kashmir Institute of International Relations and Kashmir Initiative Group was possible due to tire less efforts of Ershad Mehmud, a distinguished Kashmiri journalist who also happens to be the executive director of CPDR.

The young journalists, who had been to the other side for the first time, broke down in a jam-packed hall of Central Press Club Muzaffarabad, and it was not the song by a young singer Bano Rehmat that moved them but the long festering wound that has made people restless on both sides for many decades.

Bano's melodious voice to famous lines "*Aey Watan Teri Janat Mein Aayengey Ek Din*" (O my nation will come to your paradise one day) stirred emotions and many among the audience wept inconsolably. These were not ordinary emotions but manifestation of the pain of separation that tens of thousands of families have been living with.

It was not just about the families who are divided. Many of them could see each other after five decades only in 2005 when the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad and Poonch-Rawalakot bus services were launched as part of Confidence Building Measures. These emotions are political too. When the group of 12 journalists touched Kohala, the first entry point of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir on Pakistani side, they went hysteric. Clicking pictures and posting them instantly on social media was the first thing, as they related themselves with their own state which once had sovereignty and was on its own.

The division of 1947, which also halved the united India, severed Jammu and Kashmir into three pieces – one each in India, Pakistan and China. The outburst of emotions soon after they left the Pakistan boundary was something significant. As a state that stands divided today, Kashmiris on either side cherish the dream of reunion.

When the group reached Domail where Jhelum and Neelum (known as Kishanganga on Indian side) meet, it invoked a different emotion. Looking at a signage saying Srinagar was just 179 kilometres from there, Kabul 393 and Tashkent 578, all of them wondered: why are the people so far while being so near!

Crisscrossing through Delhi, Lahore and Islamabad to reach Muzaffarabad and not being able to cover the short distance of 179 kilometers without any

hassle is something that hurts every heart on either side. Kashmir's connection with Kabul and Central Asia has been the oldest one and trade routes used in earlier times were far easier than the artificially created ones in modern times. Till 1930, Kashmir had strong trade link with Silk Route and it continued to breathe even till 1949. Muzaffarabad was gateway to Central Asia, rather rest of the world till 1947, but it has been relegated to a back lane now.

The most significant connection Kashmiris have with this side of the world is Tajkistan where the most revered preacher and saint Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani is buried in Kolab. Kashmiris have unflinching loyalty with him and a route like this, if opened, would connect them with a great civilization where their most admired saint is buried. Also known as Ameer-e-Kabir, he traveled to Kashmir and converted majority of people to Islam. Today when the world is becoming borderless, keeping Kashmiris tied to these borders is meaningless. Whether many like it or not, Kashmiris have a level of affinity with Pakistan. They might not want to be part of the country politically, but emotionally they have a strong bond. In the past few decades when one could see Pakistan factor going down in Kashmir, it has re-emerged since 2008 while the alienation towards Delhi is growing deeper.

Not only did the journalists get a fair idea about Pakistan, its Kashmir policy and people, they also could see what the "Other Kashmir" looks like.

It was an interesting time when the group was there as the National Security Adviser (NSA-level talks were called off and the euphoria evaporated. Entire Pakistan was unanimous in accusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi of "not reciprocating Nawaz Sharif's peace overtures".

Notwithstanding the fact that Kashmiris on both sides have an undiluted desire to see the place, it was a different Muzaffarabad they found. For me it was not new, as I had seen it before and after the devastating earthquake in 2005. Today Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan Administered Kashmir (known as Pakistan Occupied Kashmir in India and Azad Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan) is a changed city.

The imprint of Turkey's liberal aid is visible as it is dotted by pencil minarets and flat domes built on the pattern of Turkish monument, Ayasofya. Surrounded by lush green mountains, it has emerged as a major tourist destination in Pakistan with clean roads and good infrastructure. For many of us, it is politically still not free. On return when the reporters came with loads of pictures and videos, many of them were asked, "Are these real" .

An invisible fear to talk freely about the atmosphere to a delegation from outside still rules the minds of the people. This is echoed by the political leaders also. But over a period of time, the tailing of a “foreigner” has reduced to a great extent.

This first of the kind visit of journalists further strengthened the argument that people-to-people contact is the only way not only to reduce the trust deficit but also to ameliorate the sufferings of the people. This divide, which is being maintained with the help of barbed wires, guns and mortars, has not helped India and Pakistan to reduce their differences. People on both sides harbor strong desire of meeting each other. It can heal the wounds they have suffered. While the CBM’s like this can only pave way and create an atmosphere of amity, the larger political question needs to be addressed in historical perspective. One feeling, which any visitor to Muzaffarabad, can get is that the state is still emotionally connected.

Though India and Pakistan have returned to hostilities, there is still hope that both countries can realize their responsibilities towards their people. Here it is pertinent to quote Prime Minister Narendra Modi who told the SAARC conference last year.

“As we seek to build bridges to prosperity, we must not lose sight of our responsibility towards the millions living without hope”.

Modi maintained that borders don’t matter much saying, “This is the call of our times. This is the age of social media, where boundaries matter little”.

This is the spirit with which two countries must move forward and allow people of Jammu and Kashmir on both sides to meet, share their grief and joy and chalk out a destiny for themselves.

Kashmir’s killing fields, Sep 2015

In the past few weeks, Kashmir witnessed fresh spate of killings. It all started with the killing of three young boys in Pattan on September 14. All the three were declared militants. While police maintains that they fell to the inter-group rivalry between Hizbul Mujahideen and the new found splinter group Lashkar-e-Islami, silence cast a shadow over the reality.

There was no widespread condemnation on day one and it took separatists little over 24 hours to call for a strike to protest the killings. At the same time Hizbul Mujahideen also owned them to counter the police theory.

The wave of mysterious killings rattled Kashmir as it could be easily connected with the horror called “Catch and Kill” executed by the police in

mid-1990s when the militancy was at its peak. It could also somehow find some relevance to another phenomenon called inter-group rivalry that took a heavy toll again in mid-1990s when nearly 500 boys of different organisations were killed at the hands of fellow militants who ostensibly had the same goal of pushing India out of Kashmir.

Since Kashmir and its situation has always been an enigma and the conflict has not allowed the truth to come out, both these theories became the fodder for the competing narratives between separatists and the government.

Whatever the truth, these killings sent shivers down the spine of people as they fear bad days ahead. Whosoever was responsible, Kashmir shut down to protest without knowing the real hand behind the killings. If the Police would come out with the findings of an investigation there would hardly be any takers given the state's dismal record of bringing out the truth.

Similarly, the accusations of the separatist camp may not be taken as gospel truth in such cases. So in the end truth becomes the casualty. Killing of these three boys evoked strong reaction from the public. But there was much worse in store. Four days after this a gruesome act was reported from Sopore where a former militant Bashir Ahmad Butt was fired upon. He died on the spot and his three-year-old son Burhan sustained serious injuries. Bashir's killing might have been taken as a routine incident but next day when the news about Burhan having succumbed to injuries reached people, it literally shook Kashmir. There was hardly an eye that did not turn moist. There were hardly any questions about who killed him and who was responsible. Barbaric, inhuman, callous and tragic were the words, which suddenly started trending on social media. Impact of Burhan's killing was huge and again the separatists called for a strike. Whether the strikes have any relevance to demonstrate the anger over such an act or not but the outrage in Kashmir was self-explanatory.

Many people equated his death with Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old innocent boy who was killed when his father tried to flee the war-torn Syria. One thing is clear that the way Kashmir responded to Burhan's killing it amply showed that such an incident was intolerable and unacceptable. Perhaps it was because of this anger that no outfit, whether known or unknown, claimed the responsibility of the attack. Sometimes when the consequences are known, hitherto unknown organisations surface and claim the responsibility. In case of attack on Burhan's father, again nothing can be said since those challenging the Indian authority in Kashmir would blame the government or its overt and covert forces. And on its

part, police blamed the militants. But there has to be a transparent and impartial probe that could take lid off such an inhuman act.

People at large were outraged to the extent that many would even say that if his former militant father was guilty of something he should have faced a thing like this but Burhan had a right to be spared.

A day later another militant commander was found dead in Tangmarg area of same district. Kashmir has otherwise been on edge as violence has again assumed centre-stage. In the absence of any meaningful political engagement, frustration is palpable and the way people are being pushed to the wall, it will further aggravate the situation. Considering that it is just a law and order or a security issue always had a negative impact. In the case of death of 3-year-old Burhan, Kashmir stands united in denouncing the violence in whatever form it knocks at our doors. This has been demonstrated by all the sections of the society. And if we go little back Kashmir's desire for peace and their support to non-violent movement to achieve their political goal has also made it clear that violence no longer had a fertile ground here.

But another stark reality that has dawned now is that there is another Burhan on the scene who becomes a driving force for scores of youth to join the ranks of militants. If there would have been a space for political engagement and in case someone realized the fact that the alienation was deep, this Burhan would not have appeared on the scene.

Today, the complexion of militancy has changed. It is no longer the domain of foreigners in Kashmir but the increasing number of locals joining the ranks has raised the indigenous stock. If little Burhan united the civilian Kashmir though unfortunately with his death, the handsome Burhan who dons a military fatigue has brought youngsters under the umbrella of Jehad. This has paved way for Hizbul Mujahideen to make a comeback.

Josy Joseph recently wrote in The Hindu that Hizb was now the biggest group in Kashmir. "…Political neglect by New Delhi of improving condition, its failure to find a lasting solution to the Kashmir issue and continuing heavy militarization of the region seems to be breathing life back into local militancy," he wrote on September 13, 2015.

If this neglect continues, Kashmir may witness more depressing moments and according to experts those may become uncontrollable as ever. Three-year-old Burhan has woken us up but if we go back into slumber it will not augur well. It is time for the civil society to resist such vagaries of conflict lest it consumes one more generation.

Kashmir Funerals – Writing on the wall

Top Lashkar-e-Taiba commander Abu Qasim, a Pakistani national, was killed in the third week of October 2015. His funeral was attended by thousands of people in south Kashmir. Large attendance of people in the funerals of militants became a trend.

When Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) commander Abu Qasim was killed in an encounter in south Kashmir's Kulgam district recently, the entire area erupted in commotion. For the police, Qasim was the most wanted militant who carried a bounty of Rs 20 lakh on his head. For the local people he turned out to be a hero after his death. Thousands of men and women, young and old, wailed and wept for him. The expression that "someone's terrorist is another's martyr" fits the story of Abu Qasim. This may not hold true with all the people living in Kashmir. But the fact remains that the gun wielding youth have made a comeback in Kashmir and they are not seen as trouble makers as was the case earlier.

Kashmir's armed rebellion has witnessed drastic changes in the last 25 years. The funeral pictures like that of Abu Qasim or Ashfaqullah Bhat tell a new story about Kashmir. What is more significant is that Abu Qasim, according to police, was a Pakistani national who led the dreaded LeT in Kashmir for four years. The reports that people from three different villages literally fought for Qasim's body to give him a decent burial tells a lot about the reality on the ground which is generally ignored or dismissed as an 'emotional outburst'. One can understand if people make a beeline to Ashfaqullah's home in Pulwama district and attend his funeral. After all he was a local Hizbul Mujahideen commander who had family roots in Kashmir. But what about Qasim?

In the context of Kashmir's changing situation, it is necessary to ponder over this new reality. A new breed of local youth, mostly educated ones, have joined militant ranks in past few years. At the same time, people's overwhelming participation, as depicted in the pictures of LeT commander's funeral, convey that violence is still not rejected as an option to demonstrate the anger against the state.

It is not necessary that all those who attended the funeral approve of violence as a means but to associate oneself with someone whose only recourse has been violence and is not even a local but a foreigner only reflects the fact that how an ordinary Kashmiri is feeling alienated from the Indian mainstream. It is not the Army that can fix the problem; it's the political approach that can heal Kashmir.

Majority of Kashmiris want peaceful resolution and have disapproved violence as the means to this end. They also see United States of America as a possible broker between India and Pakistan in resolving Kashmir. They might be even known to the fact that the US has declared LeT as an international terrorist organization. It is among 66 organisations that were banned in March 2001. But that perhaps does not matter for Kashmiris as suggested by their presence in Qasim's funeral .

While a section of Indian mainstream media has been criticizing people for rallying behind a "terrorist" and "sanctioning" the violence, they fail to understand as why Kashmir has been pushed back to this situation.

In 1994 it was Kashmir's indigenous militant outfit Jammu and Kashmir Liberation (JKLF) that unilaterally announced a ceasefire thus paving way for a non-violent course of action. That, however, did not help in changing that course. New Delhi may continue to blame Pakistan for instigating trouble, but it needs to introspect what it has done to buy peace in Kashmir.

Even as the former Pakistan president Parvez Musharraf has admitted that his country trained Kashmiri militants, it's not a revelation by any means. Islamabad abetting and aiding armed struggle is a fact widely acknowledged. But if the claim of JKLF that 600 of its members were killed after the ceasefire is to be believed, it puts the onus on New Delhi for not contributing to peaceful atmosphere.

The dynamics of militancy in Kashmir has changed from time to time. After JKLF laid down arms, Hizbul Mujahideen and other organisations continued to challenge India's writ in the Valley. When these organisations "weakened" as far as "fighting spirits or capacity" is concerned, Pakistan infused a new life into it. LeT and Jaish e Mohammad became the most potent organisation to operate in Kashmir. But the people's sanction to militancy or violence was not in the form or shape as it was in early 1990. Still the militants were never off the scene. Apart from people's waning support, it was also the change in Kashmir policy that played a significant role in minimizing violence, though many in Delhi do not like to give credit to Pakistan on this front.

In Kashmir the realities are mixed. We have seen the unprecedented turnout of 70 percent in assembly elections, which according to voters was meant for governance. Political alienation is another stark reality that comes up again and again. Similarly, the renewed support for militants as can be gauged from the large funeral gatherings, which cannot be ignored. Governments and policy makers fail to recognize the changes in the period between 2003 and 2008 when

Kashmir witnessed relative calm. Since the two tracks of dialogue, between Delhi and Islamabad and Srinagar and Delhi were on, people had reposed faith in the process with the hope that some headway could be achieved. They did that keeping in view their transition from violence to non-violence.

Since 2008, there is complete absence of political engagement. That is why a political unrest is unavoidable. Unfortunately those at the helm in Delhi fail to recognize Kashmir as a political issue. Taking the turnout in elections as the final verdict they see it as a riot-oriented and law and order issue. This approach has backfired time and again. It is not only this approach that has forced the youth to rethink its "strategy" but the successive state governments have also failed in capitalizing on the dividends of peace. The previous government headed by Omar Abdullah pushed the people particularly the youth into an era of uncertainty. When 120 people, mostly youth, were killed in 2010 (when Omar Abdullah led the NC-Congress government) it was a turning point vis-a-visa the political situation. The youth got further alienated and when no justice was delivered to the families, it only strengthened the perception that life of an average Kashmiri was worthless. Besides New Delhi, Kashmir's mainstream politicians – who while being in power see everything hunky-dory and out of it even talk of "Azaadi" – in many ways have contributed a lot to uncertainty.

Thousands attending funerals of militants is indicative of an alarming situation in Kashmir which if not understood in right perspective and context has the potential to give birth to a new phase of unrest. Large number of local youth may not be joining militancy, but the idea of violence as a means to realize political rights is back. And when thousands join the funeral of a foreigner (Qasim), do we still say, "All is well in Kashmir".

Renewed support to militancy, March 2016

For the first time in last over 25 years of conflict in Kashmir, the Jammu and Kashmir Police on February 18 issued an advisory in which they asked people to stay away from the encounter sites. A police spokesperson said about the advisory: "They (people) should not venture out as stray bullets can hit and cause damage (to the people)." The spokesperson added, "The elders, chowkidars and village elders are requested to advise people to stay away from encounter sites."

The advisory was issued after Police said that two young students were killed by stray bullets during an encounter between militants and armed forces in

south Kashmir's Pulwama district on February 14. The residents near the encounter site however refuted the police claim.

In Pulwama authorities found a different situation to handle. Unlike past incidents when at the sound of first bullet fired people used to run for cover, this time people, mostly youth, were seen marching towards the encounter site. Such an unusual development has not been witnessed in over two-decades-long standoff between forces and militants.

The events that unfolded at Pampore soon after EDI encounter ended on February 24 raise many questions on the changing dynamics of political situation in the restive state. Nine people including two captains of Indian Army were killed in the 48-hour long battle.

The situation corresponds to those existing in early 90s when armed rebellion with popular support broke out in Kashmir. Women were seen singing traditional songs eulogizing militants and public address systems of mosques were used for pro-freedom and pro-Pakistan slogans to boost the fighting spirit of carrying forward the "struggle for freedom". "*Aiye Mard e Mujahid Jaag Zara – Ab Waqta-e-Shahadat HeyAaya*" (Oh the warrior wake up, it is the time for sacrifice) was aired for a long time.

What may appear as a temporary phase to those handling the recent turn around in the government, defines a change in the ground situation. This has not come overnight but after a long lull that was marked with the breakdown of all sorts of approaches by the government promising any urge or desire to deal with Kashmir politically.

Participation and Support of People

In last over two years the outlook of militancy has changed. After receiving setbacks in mid-1990s, mainly because of rebellion within militant ranks and birth of pro-Army Ikhwan who were dismissed as “renegades” by the separatists, the militant set-up went into the hands of foreigners. Foreign militants being mostly Pakistanis, the set-up was based on an 80-20 ratio.

The arrangement continued for a long time and the reconciliatory process that developed between India and Pakistan as also between some sections in Srinagar and Delhi helped consolidate the “peace”. After peace talks got derailed in the wake of Mumbai attack in 2008, a vacuum was created. The hanging of Afzal Guru in 2013 degenerated the situation which further led to progressive despondency and frustration. Also a narrative build up on the lines perceived as anti-Kashmir, by a section of media in India and practiced by the BJP government contributed significantly to the escalation of situation when swords seemed to be out on issues such as Masarat Alam’s release, beef controversy, hoisting two flags, etc.

Analysts also do not rule out the joining of hands by PDP with the right-wing party BJP as a factor, since PDP was always seen playing middle role between National Conference and the Hurriyat. The party sought votes to keep BJP away, and in south Kashmir the youth mobilized in that spirit but ultimately PDP allied with BJP to form the government.

There has been confirmation from officials that some of the youth who actively supported PDP as election agents joined the militant ranks after the “unholy alliance” was stitched.

With no sign of intent on the part of New Delhi to approach Kashmir politically, a new window towards militancy and violence has been opened, precisely to the local youth.

In recent past a 21-year-old handsome guy, Burhan Wani, from south Kashmir’s Tral area was among the most popular on social media with his video. He became an icon for many of his fans. Official figures suggest that the trend among Kashmiri youth including some University pass outs to join militancy had set in long before.

Figures say that 28 locals joined the militant ranks in 2013, 60 in 2014, 66 in 2015 and 12 in the first two months of 2016, thus modifying the ratio of 80-20 to 70-30. The period has also seen an indigenous militant group, Hizbul

Mujahideen, making a comeback. Earlier the scene was dominated by Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Muhammad.

Large Attendance at Funerals

As militants stepped up their strikes, it led to their killings. But the most significant change observed was large participation of locals in their funerals. Two months ago when a commander of LeT, Abu Qasim, was killed in Kulgam district, his funeral was attended by over 30,000 strong gathering of people. Not only did the number swarm up in a short time but two villages fought to get the militant's body for a "decent burial". And Qasim was a Pakistani national.

Same was repeated at other funeral, which is why Police quietly removed the bodies of three Pakistani militants killed in the encounter at Pampore and buried them far away in Uri near Line of Control. People in the area had been aggressively asking for the bodies. This is the reason people have been comparing the two funerals of the militant Qasim and that of Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed who died in office on January 7 and had far lesser number of people at his funeral.

How did the militants become heroes again in Kashmir while the place has been riddled with the violence and people have repeatedly talked about the fatigue and remorse over the loss of life and property? With a status quo maintained on political front, the entry of local youth seems to have attracted the people towards this "used method". Not only has the involvement at social level made them "heroes" but many believe that the new breed of Kashmiri militants is "harmless". This is viewed in the context that unlike 90s, today's militant does not make the lives of a commoner uncomfortable. They don't indulge in local disputes, don't interfere in government functioning nor do they resort to extortion. This might be a factor playing a reverse game but the larger problem lies in the continuous denial of New Delhi to recognize Kashmir as a political dispute and addressing it politically, thus leaving a free space for extremist tendencies in which even common people get involved .

New phase of insecurity in Kashmir, June 2016

For the last few months palpable anger has been precipitating in Kashmir and that defines a new phase of insecurity that has gripped people's minds. It has come with the slew of assertions about setting up something new in Kashmir – from separate townships for Kashmiri Pandits to Sainik Colonies to provisions for non-locals in new Industrial policy to spaces being created for those not in possessions of housing facilities. This has led to a new churning in a place which has been grappling with so many challenges in past 26 years. The

‘colony’ has become a buzzword in the new discourse that is being shaped mainly by separatists, who were in disarray and have regrouped under a new but unnamed banner. Whosoever is behind these “new plans” in Delhi has given them a reason to get united. But at the same time, it is interesting to note that now the separatists are fighting to protect Article 370 and resisting the moves that they believe are aimed at changing the demography of Jammu and Kashmir.

This state of insecurity in Kashmir has been an inalienable part of its political psyche since 1947. The perceived threat to change the political and social status has loomed large all through the period of nearly seven decades and that has resulted in the current, rather long, phase of strife in the state beginning in 1990.

History is replete with stories of deception and the gradual erosion of the special status that promised a unique status to the state. The letdown, observed with contempt, imbedded the seeds of discontent that led to acute disillusionment with Congress being the main player to leave behind a legacy that never could throw up a solution. Continuous efforts by Congress to ensure state’s complete integration at its own will and conditions defied the concept of larger federation that would accommodate divergent views and respect people’s aspirations. They even adopted double standards in treating Kashmir and Tamil Nadu as sub-national identities. Thrusting governments of its choice and disrespecting the institutions of democracy in the state became the hallmark of its policies vis-a-vis Jammu and Kashmir. Right from 1947 to 1987, Kashmiris reposed faith in the democratic system despite being wooed by the powers outside to do something different. Even in 1975 when Kashmir’s tallest leader Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah entered into an “unproductive” rather humiliating Accord, Kashmiris stood by him. But in turn it only continued to subvert the process that was to rekindle faith.

Today when Kashmir is going through a critical process of self-introspection, it needs a larger space to think. But that is not happening. Even today when Kashmir needs to be approached politically, institutions of different hues are being pushed to the wall, their spaces are being shrunk and an atmosphere of suffocation is being created. As Congress put the last nail in the coffin of mistrust by hanging Afzal Guru in 2013, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in Delhi did nothing different. In fact it became more brazen in telling the people that “Kashmir has to be conquered” and the way these plans are being unfolded, it seems that New Delhi does not want peace and stability in Kashmir. On one hand, it is projecting Kashmir as normal with huge tourist rush

but on the other it is sending disturbing signals by projecting these plans that are making people insecure.

In 2015 when Late Mufti Mohammad Sayeed joined hands with BJP amid strong reservations from his own supporters, it was expected that new bridges would be built, after all BJP had now a stake in smooth functioning of the affairs in the state. That did not happen and the way Mufti was made uncomfortable leading to his unpopularity, BJP showed that it miserably failed to comprehend Kashmir. Its slogan to abrogate Article 370 did not reverberate as such but the acts it did by moving to courts on beef ban and separate flag for Jammu and Kashmir, belied the concept with which Mufti had taken the big risk of joining them. The Agenda of Alliance that was worked between the two coalition partners—PDP and BJP – remained just a pamphlet as its spirit was defied.

The latest controversies revolving around Sainik Colony and separate colony for Kashmiri pandits is not helping the state to be stable. BJP might not have directly touched upon Article 370 that remains its core agenda vis-a-vis the state, but slowly and steadily it has outsourced this job to others. Either it is RSS's J & K Study Group or any other NGO that is stirring the nest and creating a fresh round of disturbance in the Valley. After becoming partners with PDP, it might not have publicly talked about fiddling with the special status guaranteed under Article 370 but it did not compromise either. Soon after the BJP came to power in Delhi in May 2014, Minister of State in Prime Minister's Office and MP from Udhampur Dr Jitendra Singh announced that the process of its repeal had begun. "The process of repealing Article 370 has started. We are speaking to stakeholders to repeal the Act. The BJP has won more than half of the seats from Jammu and Kashmir, so will you interpret it as an endorsement of the BJP's stand? Article 370 is more like a psychological barrier," he had said inviting strong reactions from some of the stake holders.

Omar Abdullah who was still a chief minister then had some sharp words to react with. "So the new MOS PMO says process/discussions to revoke Art 370 have started. Wow, that was a quick beginning. Not sure who is talking. Mark my words & save this tweet - long after Modi Govt is a distant memory either J&K won't be part of India or Art 370 will still exist. Art 370 is the ONLY constitutional link between J&K & rest of India." Same was case from unexpected quarters – separatists who vowed to fight against it.

New Delhi might have succeeded in reducing the level of debate from "Azadi" to Article 370 but it has not helped in any way in addressing the

discontent and alienation. Kashmir is seeing emergence of a new breed of militants, almost all of them locals, and the way people have been joining funerals of the slain militants also defines a new situation in Kashmir. Rather than making efforts to have political engagement in Kashmir and truly follow the oft repeated assertion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to emulate Atal Bihari Vajpayee's doctrine based on "Insaniyat, Jamhooriyat and Kashmiriyat", all those forces who are promoted and patronized by New Delhi are adding fuel to the fire and not helping to bring Kashmir back to stability and peace. Today's Kashmir needs a political solution and by pushing these projects through the barrel of gun or arrogance of power won't help. One Kashmir gets a better political deal on the issues like rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits will resolve without the involvement of government. Put these controversies at rest and address the real issue on ground. Insecurity among Kashmiris is genuinely grounded in the past and only a forward thinking can do away with it.

Alarm bells in Kashmir, July 2016

On 25 June 2016 Lashkar-e-Taiba militants attacked a CRPF convoy, killing eight personnel and injuring 20 others. Two militants were also killed in the attack.

Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh made a strong statement in the wake of the militant attack in Pampore in South Kashmir in which eight personnel of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were killed. It was indeed an audacious attack that rattled the establishment from Srinagar to Delhi. Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti even invoked the holy month of Ramadhan to denounce the attack, saying that those who carried the attack are actually disrespecting their religion. Unnerved by the attack, Singh directly blamed Pakistan for destabilizing India. "Security forces have standing orders not to fire the first bullet, but not count bullets while retaliating," he said in strong message to those helped by Pakistan.

Renewed Phase of Militancy

An attack on a military or paramilitary convoy in Kashmir is not new, but the way both the sides – militants and security forces – have upped the ante in past few months is suggestive of a new confrontation that has begun after, what many call, the new phase of militancy dominated by the locals. A day before the Pampore attack, seven militants were killed in a gun battle in north Kashmir. The pattern that is shaping up in Kashmir is akin to what had been happening in Pakistan. The tit-for-tat game by the militants is becoming a routine here too and that also brings home the point that despite being killed on daily basis, militants are raising their head and showing their presence in South if they are under attack in North and vice versa.

The resurgence of militancy in Kashmir is something that has come out in open and is slowly taking the security situation back to square one. And in case this continues, it could lead to a situation where the involvement of public cannot be ruled out. If there is a gun battle in a crowded area which results in a collateral damage, it could trigger a fresh round of public unrest as seen in 2010. Earlier also when the militants attacked CRPF and took refuge in Entrepreneurship Development Institute (EDI) in the same area, people were rushing to encounter site unlike the 1990s when they would run for a shelter just after the first bullet was fired. Women singing in praise of militants and larger funerals are indicative of how the people have started resuming their support to violence.

Mehbooba's Election

However, the recent participation of people in Anantnag by-polls that witnessed a thumping victory for Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti is also one reality of today's Kashmir. Though the turnout was low, people reposing faith in a Chief Minister whose Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) was continuously despised for joining hands with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (at least on social media) thus opening the doors for RSS, is very significant. She not only managed to double the margin of her father's victory in December 2014 when PDP was riding on a wave and apparently asking people to vote for them to keep BJP out. Mehbooba's victory not only comes as a poser to understand many layers of reality in Kashmir but also gives her strength to run a coalition with BJP.

But the recurring attacks by militants pose a serious challenge to her as the head of the government. Nothing can be achieved in Jammu and Kashmir on the governance front unless the security environment remains relatively normal. Kashmir being on boil not only diverts the attention of any government but it also discounts any good thing done to improve the governance. That is why the political engagement to address the real issue is a must and cannot be left to only dealing with militants and counting how many were dead and how many left out to be chased. In the past three years the dynamics of militancy has drastically changed in Kashmir. Involvement of local boys has made it difficult for the government to denounce it merely as a terrorist activity. In absence of any effort to reach out to the political discontentment in Kashmir, the militancy has revived and assumed the centre stage with people openly allying with the gun wielding youth.

Indo-Pak Hostility

With Rajnath Singh asserting that bullets won't be counted in retaliation, it makes the situation worrisome. His direct blame on Pakistan also suggests that the bonhomie that started between the two countries with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lahore in December last year has waned. After Pathankot attack no discernable forward movement could be seen. Even as India gave access to Pakistani investigation team in Pathankot but that did not bring a change in the stressful relations between the two sides. The talks at the level of National Security Advisors did break the ice at one stage but it did not help in reaching a point where both countries could start addressing the critical issues one by one. As of now there is no effort to build even atmospherics. Those keeping an eye on India-Pakistan situation are of the opinion that there is stalemate and the level of hostility has returned to its past.

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's hand of friendship seems to be losing the grip. He apparently got a retired Army general as NSA to keep the Army in the loop. But the way infiltrations are going on, Army does not seem to be on board. As New Delhi also failed to make any move to address Kashmir politically and continued with its policies of pushing the people to the wall, Pakistan also contributed to the mess by hardening its stand vis-a-vis Kashmir. As of now Kashmir has again become a battlefield for both the countries to assert their legitimacy. Militant violence returning to Kashmir is surely going to occupy the space of any manoeuvring at the political level. As long as the political space remains untapped and unattended, violence will be the natural

beneficiary. Both countries must move towards engagement and New Delhi also should recognise the realities on ground and reach out politically to those who challenge its rule. Violence cannot become substitute to a political approach. If Mehbooba won comfortably in a violence-free election, this also needs to be seen as people's urge of political reconciliation, otherwise it will be just another election.

Burhan's killing and the backlash, July 2016

Hizbul Mujahiddin militant who had become an internet sensation in Kashmir was killed on July 8, 2016. His killing triggered massive unrest in Kashmir. For weeks protests, civilian killings, pellet injuries and sporadic incidents of violence were witnessed in Kashmir.

Kashmir is again on the edge. By the time I write this column 32 people have lost their lives and more than 1500 are injured. This time the eruption is not due to the death of a civilian but the most wanted commander of Hizbul Mujahideen. The killing of Kashmir militancy's poster boy Burhan Wani has left a trail of death and destruction, perhaps not anticipated by Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coalition government headed by Mehbooba Mufti, once known for her soft separatism. The situation in Kashmir valley is grim and the death of 32 people – 30 of them at the hands of police and paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has numbed the place. The premonition uttered by some analysts including the former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah that a dead Burhan may prove more dangerous than living one, has started to come true.

In the last 26 years of conflict that began with the armed rebellion against the Indian state, it is for the first time that deaths are taking place purely after the people demonstrated anger against the killing of a militant commander. In the recent past Kashmir has seen uprisings in 2008 and 2010, which have been equated with Arab Spring and the Intifada. In 2008, the trigger was Amarnath land row when the then Governor S K Sinha got a huge chunk of forest land allotted to Shri Amarnath Shrine Board (SASB), it evoked a feeling of insecurity among Kashmiris, who had already been fighting against progressive political disempowerment. The land row not only led to scores of deaths but deeply divided the two regions – Kashmir and Jammu – on communal lines. People's record participation in assembly elections that followed in December 2008 also brought another layer of reality to the fore but that did not completely wash away the strong anti-India sentiment on the ground. Only after two years,

the public anger again raised its head. A protest against the killing of three civilians in a fake encounter by Army in remote Machil area in Kupwara district sparked off protests and with the killing of a young student Tufail Mattu on June 11, 2010, Kashmir was again in flames. With Omar Abdullah in command, the public unrest taking the shape of a strong anti-India movement left 130 civilians dead. The wounds were deep and it took many months to restore order. But the sentiment did not fritter away. Omar did rule for next four years but he had lost the real power. Again in 2014, people returned to polling booths to elect a new government. As the mandate was deeply fractured and sealed the communal divide between the two regions, a new combination, termed as "meeting of North and South Pole" by the former Chief Minister Mufti Muhammad Sayeed came up as a result of PDP and BJP joining the hands. Kashmir had surely not voted for BJP to come into power but PDP allying with a party seen as anti-Muslim and anti-Kashmir further contributed to the frustration of an average Kashmiri.

At the time PDP-BJP came to power a sense of disenchantment had taken deep roots in the Kashmiri society. Hanging of Afzal Guru, a convict in the 2001 parliament attack case, had sent a strong signal to Kashmiris that New Delhi could do anything without caring for their emotions. Afzal was at the lowest number on the death row but was picked up by Congress apparently to stop Narendra Modi from reaching to Delhi, though that did not happen. Afzal's hanging opened a new door for Kashmiri youth to return to what they had left in mid-1990s. Not that Kashmiri boys were not part of the militancy that flourished under the command of foreigners, but their participation was low. Coupled with the new wave of intolerance across India, Kashmiri youth started feeling more insecure and their vulnerability due to absence of employment opportunities created more space for the violent route. However, when a bunch of educated youth turned to militancy, it set a new standard in the path that Kashmiris had abandoned long back to pave way for peaceful resolution of the political issue. Their participation in the militancy changed its dynamics and people started attending their funerals in large numbers. They not only endorsed the participation of local boys in the violence but also rallied behind foreigners. When Abu Qasim, a Pakistani commander of Lashkar-e-Toiba, was killed in early 2016, his funeral was attended by over 30000 people. All Kashmiris might not have participated in the active militancy but the support they have been demonstrating tells about the Kashmir story that is akin to what happened in

early 1990s when a large number of Kashmiri youth picked up the gun and were sheltered in every home.

As in any other conflict there are many layers of reality in Kashmir. People seeking employment and also taking part in the elections to elect a government are part of that. But the deep sense of anger against the state is the manifestation of people's urge to see a resolution of Kashmir issue. From 2003 to 2008 when India and Pakistan were involved in a productive peace process as also New Delhi opening up channels of dialogue with separatists in Kashmir, the people wholeheartedly supported that process, as they believed that it was meant for finding some solution. But after 2008 Mumbai attack that derailed the process; there is not only complete absence of political engagement but also a denial that there is any issue called Kashmir. Instead newly created concepts of Sainik Colonies, separate townships for Kashmiri Pandits and other things are thrust on the state furthering the insecurity of an average Kashmiri.

And what was seen in the aftermath of Burhan Wani's killing is the outpouring of the pent up emotions that have been bubbling inside. Wani's funeral was unprecedented with an estimated 2 lakh people taking part in it. If a senior police officer who has been on the forefront of counter insurgency is to be believed he did not take part in any action. "The truth is, despite all his "virtual" bravado, despite being a poster boy, he could not carry out a single action against security forces," the officer wrote on his Facebook page. But then how he was immortalized as a new icon of Kashmir resistance? Burhan represented new generation of Kashmiris and he used the social media to attract people. Difference in him and the militants of 90s was that he did not hide behind a mask nor he used any alias. He would circulate a video that would go viral. Police officers admit that Burhan became an inspiration for some though not many. He redefined the militancy in Kashmir and brought back its indigenous colour. Earlier, militancy was dominated by foreigners, but now it has regained its indigenous nature. Pakistan may be the biggest promoter of violence in Kashmir, but the way tens of thousands of people have rallied behind a militant commander even leading to death of three dozen more in the aftermath, it defines the new reality in Kashmir.

It is the lack of political will to approach Kashmir politically and stay in denial mode, all the time dismissing it as Pakistan sponsored movement, brushing it aside as merely a law and order issue and refusing to acknowledge that an average Kashmiri is politically dissatisfied that has brought Kashmir

back to square one. It was and remains a volcano that has the potential to erupt anytime.

The rage in Kashmir's youth, August 2016

Kashmir has been on the boil for 26 days now. The killing of Hizbul Mujahideen commander Burhan Wani has brought normal life to a grinding halt. In the violence that followed, 55 people have been killed and thousands injured. The government in New Delhi is unmoved and the Mehbooba Mufti-led PDP-BJP coalition has failed to normalise the situation. Notwithstanding the presence of the armed forces, Kashmir has undoubtedly slipped into the 'azaadi' discourse and the mainstream parties have retreated .

South Kashmir, where Burhan was killed, is considered to be a PDP stronghold. On June 21, Mehbooba won a by-election with a significant margin, but the area refuses to embrace normalcy. It has spearheaded the current phase of unrest that replicates 2008 and 2010, when Kashmir erupted with the renewed call for resolving the political issue. The Amarnath land row in 2008 pushed Kashmir back to abnormality and the 2010 agitation further galvanised it. A lull of six years ended when violence engulfed the Valley yet again. Whatever narrative a section of the media, particularly the television channels, uses to let an average Indian to know that it was "all the handiwork" of Pakistan, the fact remains that the way Kashmir is reacting is the reflection of a deep-rooted political discontent that has not been addressed.

Today the government is not in control of the situation and it is akin to 1990, when a parliamentary delegation headed by Rajiv Gandhi visited Srinagar and reported back "we have lost Kashmir". The only difference is that then Farooq Abdullah had resigned and gone away from Srinagar. Notwithstanding the fact that today the mainstream parties such as National Conference (NC), the PDP and Congress have formidable structures on the ground, they lack the audacity to wage a fight against the dominant political discourse that has been shaping and guiding the agitation centered on 'azaadi'. Iftikhar Misgar, the NC candidate who unsuccessfully fought the bypolls against Mehbooba, publicly called off his relationship with the mainstream and chanted pro-azaadi slogans in a crowd in Anantnag. He was followed by Mujeeb-Ur-Rahman who had also fought the election against Mehbooba. Most mainstream party workers have gone into hiding to save themselves from public wrath.

The anger that is ruling the streets is the manifestation of a long-pending political dispute that New Delhi refuses to recognise. The 'hate India'

movement has moved to the fourth generation and the boys who seem to be at the helm today have even challenged the relevance of an influential leader like Syed Ali Geelani, who issues protest calenders under a joint platform with Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik. The past few days have seen these ‘boys’ defying the relaxation programme contained in these calendars and asked shopkeepers not to open their shutters. It was left to the Lashar-e-Toiba to ask the people to follow their programme. A visit to Pulwama district is itself a challenge. A few camps of a Special Operations Group of J&K Police have been razed to the ground and the Army is in the barracks. It was in Kareemabad (Pulwama) that a militant commander appeared in a public rally of thousands on July 31. For the residents it is a “liberated zone”.

There is no denying the fact that the state government failed to handle the situation, but the real problem lies in the political disconnect that has been cemented over a period of time. With the PDP joining hands with the BJP, adding to the discomfort an average Kashmiri feels with New Delhi, a string of proposals such as the beef ban, challenging the state flag, setting up of a Sainik colony and a separate township for Kashmiri Pandits have left the Kashmiris more insecure in an atmosphere that has been overlapping with the wave of intolerance across India. The hanging of Afzal Guru pushed Kashmir into a new phase of militancy, which is now dominated by the local youth whose numbers have been increasing. Wani emerged as an ‘icon’ who symbolised the increasing anger against the State. He thus found a place in a society that had bid farewell to violence in the mid-1990s. His coming to the forefront also demonstrates that Kashmir was in search of a leader as people had lost faith in others. With tens of thousands of people attending his funeral it brings forth the dark reality that suggests that people are losing faith in the democratic ways of achieving a political goal.

In such situations what gets strengthened in Kashmir is that New Delhi has neither cared about Kashmir in the past nor does it do so today. The appointment of interlocutors after the 2010 unrest and an all-party delegation visiting Srinagar was something the UPA did, but they failed the people by not even owning the report it submitted. If your own government in the state has failed to make a difference, there is no way out but to engage with the separatists who may not represent the political constituencies, but have a certain proximity to the dominant sentiment on the ground. The cry for ‘azaadi’, even if it may not be palatable is getting louder today and the youth who are at its forefront have the potential to drift away into violence. Pakistan may avail this

opportunity but the larger question that needs to be addressed is who offered this to them on a platter? Certainly New Delhi has failed in recognising the political nature of the problem.

Curfewed Kashmir, August 2016

Soon afterBurhan Wani's killing on July 8, 2016, unrest in Kashmir spread from village to village and district to district. Thousands of youth joined the streets to protest. Scores were killed in the first few weeks during the agitations. The government imposed curfew in the valley to control the situation, which was extended by weeks together.

In its 26-year-long conflict Kashmir is witnessing the longest ever phase of curfew and that demonstrates how bad and uncontrolled the situation is in the valley. In the past it was 19-day-long curfew imposed by the then Governor Jagmohan's administration in January 1990. But today's spell has assumed new dimensions. It is without any break for about 50 days and it has been extended to night as well in order to break the writ of separatists as they call for relaxations in shutdown during the evening hours. Kashmir has a long history of curfews preceding the armed rebellion that broke out in 1989. In 1984 when Farooq Abdullah was dethroned by his brother-in-law Ghulam Mohammad Shah, the latter resorted to curfew to contain people's agitation that rocked Kashmir in protest against the coup. Today's curfew is, however, different by all accounts and is apparently aimed at tiring out the people. This is like a capsule strategy that includes forces being given freehand to beat the people, ransack the houses and curtail their movements as much as possible.

Iron Hand Method

That, however, has not stopped people from taking out huge rallies in different parts of Kashmir calling for ‘azadi’. In many areas there are free zones where police and administration does not intervene in the rallies, again with the idea that it would lead to fatigue and will be followed by their involvement in fruit packing season and other harvesting business. If the statements of fruit growers are to be believed they would go with the protest calendars issued by the joint Hurriyat irrespective of the losses incurred. Same is the case with other trade bodies that have vowed to abide by the calendars. Unlike 2010, when murmurs about people’s concern over continuous closure of educational institutions and the businesses were heard only after two weeks, this time Kashmir is silent over the future of students. Has the situation been taken as fate accompli with people repeatedly saying this is a “now or never battle”, though it is never explained. But the palpable anger that has taken deep roots with the death of nearly 70 people and injuries to over 7000 is setting a new course that is seemingly out of anybody’s control.

Government’s iron hand method is demonstrative of how the situation has gone completely out of control. Since there is no political reach out, the Army, para-military CRPF and the Police are the only answer to growing dissatisfaction and unprecedented anger the people especially youth have been harbouring. State government, which is combination of two extreme ideologies – Bharatiya Janata Party and Peoples Democratic Party – has failed to reconnect with the agitating Kashmir. PDP that swore by the ideology of “Self Rule” with dignity and honour to people is finding it extremely difficult with the BJP government at Centre doing everything to further discredit it.

Contradictions Galore

For over 50 days now, Government of India has only been projecting it as a Pakistan sponsored “game” but without elaborating what it then meant for India. On August 21, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said at a function in Jammu that it was Pakistan’s fifth war against India, which it had unleashed through stones. He vowed that there would be no compromise with stone pelters whom he called aggressors. Jaitley is considered to be among the core team of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his tone and tenor at the Jammu meeting is a message that again will be counter-productive in Kashmir, where people see it as contempt.

While Jaitley and Home Minister Rajnath Singh have been maintaining aggressive posture to convey that there was hardly any space to conciliate, in a surprise development Prime Minister Modi talked a slightly different language. On August 22, Modi told a delegation of opposition parties from Jammu and Kashmir led by former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah that development alone could not solve every issue. He also talked about the killing of “youth and security personnel” that brings distress and called them “part of us, our nation”. In view of the intensity of situation existing in Kashmir that is full of despair and distress, these words might not help much but this is for the first time since July 9, Modi has referred to the youth who were killed in firing by the forces. Modi also called for lasting solution within the framework of constitution.

Though it seems that New Delhi has brought a mild change in its approach, largely there is no effort to reach out to the people who have been caged for long turning Kashmir virtually into a prison for 50 days. Those who look at Modi’s statement as “huge” have a reason to think so as he had not spoken a word in last over one and a half month. Credit must go to joint opposition of Jammu and Kashmir who knocked at his door and President of India to bring forth the new and painful reality on ground in Kashmir. Being part of the coalition government, Modi could have done this long before not only owing it as a responsibility as PM but also as partner in the state government. Not much may change with this development but time has not been lost if realization is kept in mind and a forward movement is pushed without any conditions. The theory that those creating trouble are “handful’ is bound to backfire and would not create any space for dialogue. What is significant is that Indian Supreme Court too called for a political solution while hearing a petition on August 22. “This issue has various dimensions and therefore should be dealt with

politically. Everything can’t me managed in judicial parameters,” observed the court thus putting the government that has been in denial in a tight spot .

Shrunk Spaces

Today Kashmir is not even ready to tell its stories to journalists from Delhi. A civil society delegation that visited Srinagar last week had to face hostile crowd at SMHS Hospital Srinagar with anti-India slogans renting the air. Though the members of delegation which included Mani Shankar Aiyar, Prem Shankar Jha, Kapil Kak and Vinod Sharma have been more or less sympathetic to suffering population but the trust deficit has reached a crescendo. Leaders of joint Hurriyat such as Syed Ali Geelani and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq refused to meet them. This brings us to the point that the spaces for dialogue have been shrunk due to the attitude with which Delhi has been looking at Kashmir. Making the security apparatus as the only visible symbol of the state has further eroded that space. As of now it looks unlikely that spaces for meaningful dialogue will be opened given the indifferent and dangerous approach of New Delhi vis-à-vis Kashmir.

Kashmir's wails lost in war cry, October 2016

India and Pakistan will not fight a war. But they certainly have a stake in creating a war-like situation. At least that is what the situation seems to suggest.

War cry has dominated the narrative that shaped, particularly in India since September 18 attack on an Army base in Uri leaving 20 soldiers dead. The situation was further compounded with the announcement of surgical strikes by New Delhi. Pakistan denied India's claims of crossing Line of Control (LoC) and targeting the launching pads of militants. But on its part Government of India stood firm on its stand and even promised to release the videos of the action at appropriate time. Media went whole hog in projecting it as a victory. Similarly Pakistani media too jumped on the bandwagon and countered it with full vigour. As a result, a war like situation was thrust on either side .

Notwithstanding a "restrained" approach adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in addressing the concerns of the people in the wake of the Uri attack, the government had to adopt tough posturing vis-a-vis Pakistan and convince its people that there would be no compromise on Uri. So to avenge it, this action of "surgical strikes" had to come. Though the entire Indian media fell in line to "celebrate" this practice of teaching a lesson to Pakistan, some well-known experts in India, questioned the validity of this claim. They could be in minority but questions were raised which continue to remain unanswered. However, these "strikes" have deflated the pressure that was mounting on Modi

government to punish Pakistan. And this was coming more from the media. The government addressed the concern by taking this route, even as it might lead to opening of a new trail of tit-for-tat between the two countries.

As pointed out by many analysts, such strikes or attacks on either side are not new and have taken place in the past. Take a look at some of the incidents that were not publicly owned by the governments, the way the current Modi government has done.

- In March 1998, an Indian special forces unit allegedly killed 22 people at village of Bandala, in the Chhamb sector. The Pakistani military then claime have recovered an Indian-made watch from the scene. It was also alleged this operation was carried out to avenge the massacre of 29 Hindu villager Purankote, in Jammu and Kashmir by Lashkar-e-Taiba.
- In May 1999, Pakistani forces kidnapped Captain Saurabh Kalia, along v sepoys Bhanwar Lal Bagaria, Arjun Ram, Bhika Ram, Moola Ram and Na Singh. A post-mortem revealed that their bodies had been burned with cigare ends and their genitals had been mutilated. Eight months later, in January 2(seven Pakistani soldiers were alleged to have been captured in the Na enclave across the Neelam River. Their bodies were returned. Pakistan clai they bore torture marks.
- On February 24, 2000, Pakistan Army claimed that there was a massacr Lanjote village in Nakyal-Kotli sector in Pakistan Administered Kashmir v 16 bodies strewn on the streets. Pakistan Army officials claimed there w handwritten note, which said, “how does your own blood feel”. Pakistan claimed that the killings were carried out by Indian special forces. India has responded to the allegations but intelligence officials do point out that after the mass killing of Hindus by militants stopped.
- In June 2008, Pakistani troops attacked the Kranti border observation post i Salhotri village in Poonch, killing 2-8 Gurkha Regiment soldiers in Jawash Chhame. Days after, the retaliation came as Pakistani Army officials repo the beheading of one of their soldiers in the Bhattal sector in Poonch. Finally 30 August, 2011, Pakistan complained that three soldiers, including a J were beheaded in an Indian raid on a post in the Sharda sector, across Neelam river valley in Kel. It was said that this was in retaliation for decapitation of two Indian soldiers near Karnah.
- On 8 January 2013, Pakistani soldiers came across the Line of Control (L into Indian territory and ambushed a patrol, killing two soldiers. It responded, but the UPA government chose not to go public.

However, the latest surgical strikes came in the backdrop of heightened tension between the two countries that had a complex dimension. Not only was the Uri attack a trigger, but the three-month long unrest in Kashmir and the war of words between New Delhi and Islamabad at the United Nations had taken it to a different level.

In spite of all that Prime Minister Modi practiced his blow-hot blow-cold policy, as his challenge was bigger than that of Pakistan- one to reach out to his constituency, that has been built up with an anti-Pakistan and anti-terror tinge and the other to keep the chances of war low to address the international concerns. This made it difficult for him to weigh the options. His speech at the BJP meet in Kozikode on September 24 was to deliver more than two messages. One that attacks like Uri wont go without any cost and other being reconciliatory by talking about war but against poverty. He continued with that narrative even after the surgical strikes and mentioned that India has never attacked any country. “India has not attacked anyone. It is neither hungry for any territory. But in the two World Wars (in which India had no direct stake), 1.5 lakh Indian troops had laid down their lives fighting for others,” he said at a function in Delhi on October 2.

That is why the process of de-escalation began sooner than expected as the National Security Advisers of both countries spoke on October 3 and Sartaj Aziz, Foreign Affairs Adviser to Pakistan Prime Minister said that both sides agreed to reduce the tension. Not only would both the countries be “interested” in de-escalation but the persuasion by Washington must have played a role in it. It, however, remains to be seen as to how this process unfolds in next few weeks since Pakistan has raised its stakes over Kashmir and New Delhi has preferred to ignore the ground realities in Kashmir.

Unfortunately this renewed escalation between India and Pakistan, that started with Uri attack has pushed the volatile situation in Kashmir to the background. Kashmir is a forgotten chapter. For nearly three months it has been locked between curfew and strikes. Schools, colleges and businesses being shut are new parametres of normalcy and that is what perhaps suits New Delhi that continues to be in a denial mode. Killing of 90 civilians at the hands of police and paramilitary forces and injuries to over 11,000 has been in a accepted as a norm to contain the protests that are political in nature and are directly linked to the political resolution of the problem. But with both the countries having locked horns over it, the militant attacks have taken the centre-stage and what is happening on ground is now being defined with that as a reality. India and

Pakistan may de-escalate for their own compulsions, but Kashmir remains unattended and is an open wound that would continue to give pain to its people .

Military approach, 2017

The Government of India's policy on Jammu and Kashmir is almost clear. For the last few months the situation has been intermittently taking one ugly turn after another with the addition of student unrest giving it a new dimension. For about two weeks some prominent colleges and schools in Srinagar have been officially shut. Re-opening them is becoming a major challenge for the authorities. There is no let-up in the pitched battles between the local population and the security forces when an operation is launched against the militants. The resistance continues and the major operation launched by the Army in South Kashmir on May 4 did not yield any results. They have not given up, and on May 17 a similar operation was set in motion, though with fewer men. The dilemma the security forces are facing is whether it is a risk worth taking. According to police sources, 88 militants are active in the South Kashmir but flushing them out could lead to massive collateral damage since people are putting up a resistance.

Defence Minister Arun Jaitley and Chief of Army Staff Gen. Bipin Rawat visited Srinagar on May 18 and 19 to review the situation. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government is facing mounted pressure to go hard on Kashmir, its policy is dotted with security concerns rather than political exigencies. It has a double-edged sword hanging over its head. 'Nationalist' media, especially the TV channels, have upped the ante to "teach both Pakistan" and a "handful of troublemakers in Kashmir" a lesson. With an eye on the 2019 general elections and the ambition to "conquer" all the states where elections are due in the next two years, its handling of Kashmir is becoming crucial.

On the other hand, it is in a coalition with a regional party in Kashmir, which till a few years ago was seen as peddling soft separatism and a strong pro-Kashmir and pro-dialogue line. Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, who also heads the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), raised it from scratch mainly by showing sympathy not only to civilian victims of state atrocities but also to the families of militants. Her father was a votary of dialogue and reconciliation with both Pakistan and the Hurriyat. That is why when the alliance between the PDP and BJP was being cobbled together in 2015 it took two months to finalise the Agenda of Alliance (AoA) that has clear mention of the dialogue.

However, no forward movement was seen on the AoA. Instead the provocations from the BJP and its ideological cohorts became the hallmark of its Kashmir policy. This led to unprecedented unrest in the summer of 2016, which broke all records of human rights violations as pellet guns became a new tool to blind and maim scores of young people. The people's involvement in the agitation notwithstanding the charge from the government that Pakistan played a significant role in fuelling the unrest was complete.

When the unrest started dying down, the hope was that New Delhi would use the space to reach out to people through the political representatives of both the mainstream and separatist leadership. Though a parliamentary delegation visited Kashmir in September 2016, the Joint Hurriyat Conference leadership comprising Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Umar Farooq and Yasin Malik refused to meet them while they were either in detention in police stations or under house arrest. Consequently, there was no breakthrough. Engagement continued to prove elusive with the Centre taking refuge under Pakistan's proxy war in Kashmir.

An initiative by a citizens' group led by former foreign minister and BJP leader Yashwant Sinha, however, did break the ice when they arrived in Srinagar on their own. Since Sinha is a senior politician his visit was taken seriously and the Hurriyat leaders engaged with him. The sense is that soon after the group came, the situation showed a marked improvement as people pinned hopes on the visit based on the impression that he was from the BJP, he must have the ear of the Centre. Sadly, that was not the case as Sinha himself said in an interview that he was not even granted an appointment by the Prime Minister. Word on the political grapevine in Delhi is that he was under pressure to quit his "Kashmir mission" as the BJP was feeling jittery about it and finding it difficult to defend. It will not be a surprise if the party shows him the door to send a strong signal that no engagement on Kashmir was possible .

At the same time, the non-BJP parties have been toying with the idea of a Kashmir Conclave in Delhi to attract attention of the rest of the country towards the "real issue". Janata Dal (United) party's Sharad Yadav has been leading the initiative but some BJP leaders have already dismissed it as a move to "discredit Modi". Congress is also struggling to be relevant by having a policy group of Kashmir led by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. But the moot question is will Modi take them seriously?

Since New Delhi has clearly drawn its lines, what options would it follow in its own wisdom? This is not difficult to guess since the functionaries in the

government have made it clear. BJP general secretary and its point man on Kashmir, Ram Madhav, made it clear that no engagement was possible with the likes of Hurriyat. Minister of State in Prime Minister's Office Jitendra Singh has also ruled out any overtures. In response to an exposé by India Today that showed a senior Hurriyat leader accepting that money was coming from Pakistan, he said, "[M]ilitancy and the trouble in Kashmir is sponsored. It is mercenary violence and militancy." He claimed that the Hurriyat has no support and the youth of Kashmir prefer the Narendra Modi development model. "There is a wheel of fear that is containing them but they will overcome it." Contrary to this, Mehbooba Mufti has been batting for talks. When she met Prime Minister Modi on April 27 she told the media this was the only option. How long can you have a confrontation? "Talks with Hurriyat (Conference) had taken place when Vajpayee ji was the Prime Minister and LK Advani ji was the Deputy Prime Minister. We need to start from where Vajpayee ji left [off]. Talks are the only way out."

The fact is, however, that New Delhi is unmoved. There is clarity in its policy now that envisages handling Kashmir through security measures alone. Even though PM Modi apparently is aligned with the policy of the "iron hand" being pushed by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and supported by Defence Minister Arun Jaitley and Dr Jitendra Singh, the Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh appears not to be on the same page. At the peak of the unrest in 2016 he tried to reach out but this effort was "subverted" by those who wanted to send a strong message through military power.

In the past few weeks the Army has been moved and preparations are being made to flush out militants; a major operation is in the offing. But if the risk is not calculated, this could push Kashmir into a new phase of uncertainty. If it does not deliver the desired results and leads to collateral damage, this could well plunge the state into a political crisis. It might be difficult for the PDP to continue if the military solution backfires. But the outcome could be the imposition of Governor Rule as demanded by the opposition. That may come at a huge cost for the BJP locally as well as internationally as it will lose face and will fail to put up a front of democracy in Kashmir. The April 9 elections to the Srinagar parliamentary constituency and subsequent cancellation of elections for Anantnag have shown how people rejected the process, which was even made possible at the peak of militancy.

What has further squeezed the possibility of building an atmosphere of reconciliation is the increasing hostility between India and Pakistan for which

Kashmir becomes a victim. The face-off between the two countries at the Hague in the fight to save Kulbhushan Jadhav, who has been awarded a death sentence by a military court in Pakistan worsened relations. A section of ‘nationalist’ media continues to push for hard measures to “reclaim” Kashmir and abandon the path of dialogue and reconciliation. But listening to that noise comes at a price for a Prime Minister who ascended to power in Delhi in 2014 with the ambition of becoming the tallest leader in South Asia. Machismo will fail with Kashmir. It only talking that can help. Past governments have also failed to win any hearts and minds at the barrel of the unbridled power of the gun. Kashmir was back to normalcy, albeit fragile, only when a space for dialogue opened up and was created by both New Delhi and Islamabad from 2003 to 2007. The rest of history is replete with misery in the shape of a gun or a stone .

Myth of radicalization in Kashmir

For the last few months a new narrative is being parroted on Kashmir to give the impression that whatever has been happening on the ground is the direct result of so-called Islamisation. When these experts qualify this, they make sweeping assertions saying that Kashmir is under the thrall of 'Wahhabisation', which is synonymous with Salafi thought and is known in Kashmir through a section of Muslims who are identified as the Ahle Hadith. Wahhabism was a revivalist movement launched by an eighteenth century theologian, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab from Najd, Saudi Arabia. Its followers are mainly in Arab world with the highest 48 percent in Qatar. But in recent times the term Wahabism has been used profusely in relation to Kashmir and one at times wonders whether Kashmir is the capital of this ideology.

The "experts", especially those on TV channels, are conveniently using it to paint a political problem as one connected with Islam. When the odd ISIS flag is held by some delinquent boys after Friday prayers at Jamia Masjid it becomes the headline of the day.

There is no denying that Ahle Hadith's popularity has grown in the past few years and that this is the consequence of changes taking place the world over. But has this section of society taken the lead role in a political struggle that has been going on for over 27 years? No. Kashmir's armed struggle was pioneered by Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front in the late 1980s and it is known for its secular ideology aimed to unite the state of Jammu and Kashmir, as it existed in 1947. And then it was propelled forward in 1990 with the introduction of the Hizbul Mujahideen and other outfits that linked Kashmir's struggle to Islam and Pakistan. The number of these organisations ran into dozens as many sections of society who felt marginalized in the new political reality joined the armed rebellion. The Tehreek-ul-Mujahideen was one outfit that was apparently the armed wing of Ahle Hadith but both did not own this "reality" publicly. Interestingly not a single youth who has studied in any Madrassa or Darul Uloom run by all schools of thought has been found to have joined the militant ranks in last over 10 years. It was a well-known fact that some smaller outfits were launched to ensure political survival and safeguard the cadre.

The Ahle Hadith movement is not new to Kashmir; it is believed that the number of mosques it runs has increased from 500 in 1990 to 900 in 2017 and this is mainly accomplished with funding from Saudi Arabia that is being monitored by the Ministry of Home Affairs as the institutions connected with

Ahle Hadith are among the few that have been granted Foreign Contribution Regulation Act certificates.

This movement in the Kashmir Valley is 120 years old. The first Ahle Hadith mosque was set up in Srinagar in 1897 by Anwar Shah Shopiani, who hailed from Shopian. He was influenced by the Salafi movement in the then-undivided Punjab. Those who nurtured Ahle Hadith in Kashmir have been influenced by scholars like Moulana Sanaullah Amritsari, Abul Qasim Banarasi, Abdul Aziz Rahimabadi. In fact the main Islamic movements such as the Jamaat-e-Islami, Ahle Hadith and Barelvi have been influenced by their peers in India. Ahle Hadith in Kashmir has not played much of a role in the separatist movement though it was part of the joint Hurriyat Conference until it was split in 2003. After that it did not join any other factions. In fact, after the assassination of one of its vibrant presidents, Moulana Showkat, it preferred to keep a low profile and has not been seen in a leading role in the political movement since.

But the way this narrative of "wahabisation" is now being weaved, it seems to be part of a greater strategy to pursue a hard line on Kashmir and then justify it. Sushil Pandit, one of the Kashmiri Pandit political commentators, told a panelist from Srinagar recently that "much more was yet to come". The panelist was talking about the sufferings people have gone through. Similarly, one is amused to hear to a BJP spokesperson concerned about "Kashmir's Azadi movement". "Where is your Azadi movement? It has been hijacked by Salafi Islam," this spokesperson told another panelist from Srinagar. In other words this would mean that the BJP had no issues with an "independence movement" if it were kept aloof from Pakistan and Islam?

Kashmir's political disempowerment dates back to 1586 when Mughal Emperor Akbar dethroned the last sovereign ruler Yusuf Shah Chak and banished him. People have been struggling since then and they have not differentiated between a Muslim and a non Muslim ruler who invaded. Even today none in the joint resistance leadership of Syed Ali Geelani, Mirwaiz Farooq and Yasin Malik ascribes to the Salafi or Wahabi ideology. Geelani is a known pro-Pakistan leader but he was the first to denounce ISIS and Al Qaeda and has always maintained that the wishes of the people are the ultimate motivator. That is because Kashmiris have refrained from mixing politics with religion. Their outright disapproval for Hizb commander Zakir Musa's assertions about an "Islamic Caliphate" make this evident. Why has Kashmir become the battle field for those militants who talk about Islamisation! It is because of the continued denial of Delhi to address the political issue and the

space created by Kashmiris after transition from violence to non-violence has been used well by those elements.

Kashmiris take pride in their past, even their Hindu past. Hurriyat Conference leader Prof. Abdul Gani Bhat describes the fight in Kashmir between the Brahmins of India and Brahmins of Kashmir. “We Kashmiris are saraswati Brahmins, Indian Brahmins are Lakshmi Brahmins. We shall prevail,” he says. When Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah supported Maharaja Hari Singh’s accession to India against the prevailing two-nation theory that would have automatically made J&K part of Pakistan, people were behind him but the truth soon emerged. When he was humiliated and dethroned in 1953, people realized that New Delhi’s intention was not based on sincerity.

Even if one goes by the theory of “Islamisation” why have only 100 Kashmiris become militants in the last four years compared to 15,000 in 1990? None other than an erudite police officer Swayam Prakash Pani who is currently Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police in South Kashmir has busted this myth of radicalization. “The second myth is that the recruits are all radicalised youth. The reason for joining militancy in most of the cases has been found to be peer-group contact and not a strong radical lineage. Of course, after joining the terror fold, expressing radical thoughts in the social media at times becomes a potent weapon in some cases. This is seen to gain attention and give them the high moral ground to defend their acts of violence” Pani wrote in Hindustan Times on June 1, 2017.

The radicalization is political. Most Kashmiris argue that if there is religious indoctrination in Kashmir, it is justified in view of what is happening in the rest of India under the BJP. The concern is that there is an effort being made by the government and supported by TV channels to push Kashmir towards this kind of radicalization only to posit it as a justification to say no to political settlement.

AFSPA AND KILLINGS

Armed Forces Special Powers Act has a colonial history. It was promulgated before the independence of India and Pakistan, on 15 August 1942 by the then Viceroy of India Lord Linlithgow under the Churchill government. AFSPA was invoked to crush the separatist movement called Quit India Movement launched by the leaders of Indian National Congress.

After the Indian Independence, AFSPA was reinvented by the Indian government under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to crush the insurgency of Nagas in 1950s. The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Bill was passed by both the Houses of Parliament and it was approved by President Rajendra Prasad on September 11, 1958. It came to be known as the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.

The Indian government under Nehru and the British government under Churchill apparently shared a similar view – their accepted position was to show zero tolerance towards separatist movements or insurgency in any part of the territory under the dominion. Despite the criticism on handing over greater powers that could also be abused, the governments went ahead with AFSPA and even defended it. The approach was military rather than finding a political solution to separatist voices.

When it was reinvented by Nehru government, more powers were vested to the forces. At the time of Churchill government, the powers rested and could have been exercised only by Army, Navy and Air Force personnel. But the AFSPA of 1958 extended these powers to police and para military forces like Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police Force.

- *Central government imposes Governor Rule in January 19, 1990*
- *Legislative Assembly formally dissolved in February 1990*
- *In September 1990 the Governor invoked the Disturbed Areas Act and the s was declared disturbed.*
- *Act remained in force till 18 July 1992*
- *Replaced by Disturbed Areas Act of 1992 which was reenacted in the stat Presidential Act*
- *Central government enacted the Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandig Special Powers Act on 6 October 1983 and was enforced on 13 October 198*
- *State Assembly enacted Disturbed Areas Act of 1997. Act lapsed in 1998*

- *Central govt enforced AFSPA (J&K) from July 5 retrospectively a AF(J&K)SPA was passed by Indian Parliament in September 1990.*
- *Governor declared only 20 km belt along LoC in Rajouri and Poonch and districts Srinagar, Budgam, Anantnag, Pulwama, Baramulla and Kupwara disturbed under Section 3 of the AF(J&K)SPA through a notification on Jul 1990.*
- *Governor decalred whole of Jammu disturbed under notification 10 Aug 200*
- *UNHR Committee in 1991 found Section 4 of the AFSPA to be incompat with Articles 6, 9 and 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Polit Rights (ICCPR), 1966 .*

AFSPA: Noncommittal as usual, 2013

In 2013, Union Minister of State for Home, M Ramachandran shrugged off the issue of revocation of controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) by putting the ball in Jammu and Kashmir government's court that there was no formal request from the state in this regard.

In reply to a question by Dr Thokohom Meinya and Gurudas Das Gupta, MOS M Ramachandran said: "Only the state of Nagaland has made a request in working for de-notification of the disturbed area. Keeping the internal security imperatives in mind, the request could not be acceded to." What Mr Ramchandran wanted to convey by saying so is not difficult to guess. It is simply to dodge the question and rather discredit Chief Minister, Omar Abdullah who has been repeatedly asking for partial withdrawal of AFSPA and maintaining that the discussion was on. This precisely means that it was taken up with Government of India though nothing concrete could be achieved so far. By simplifying the answer, the MOS has not only negated the demand but also the two committees that had already been constituted to look into it.

Earlier also, Union Home Ministry gave a similar reply to a question posed by National Conference MP, G N Rattanpuri in which it was stated that no formal request had been made by the state for withdrawal of the Act. Looking at the issue through technical prism, first of all there is no need for a formal request from state as in case the Jammu and Kashmir government withdraws the Disturbed Area Act (DAA); AFSPA will automatically become infructuous. But no state government has the power to do so without taking Government of India into confidence.

Looking back at the developments that have taken place vis-a-vis this demand, a formal discussion has been on since 2007. When PDP founder Mufti

Mohammad Sayeed threatened to upset Ghulam Nabi Azad government and raised the pitch for withdrawal of armed forces and AFSPA (obviously he had not reconciled with the handing of power to Azad), GOI announced to set up two committees to be directly supervised by Defence Minister A K Antony. The announcement was made on April 1, 2007 and subsequently a committee headed by Defence Secretary Shekhar Dutt was set up to review troop deployment and considering relocation and reconfiguration of armed forces from schools. The committee did its work but the one for AFSPA was never set up. However, Defence Minister himself attended at least two meetings with Unified Headquarters during Omar Abdullah's tenure and the issue was discussed. Moreover, two high-powered committees were constituted on September 29, 2010, as a follow-up to the Centre's direction.

After Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) announced the eight-point package for Jammu and Kashmir, that included review of areas declared disturbed, two committees, one each for Kashmir and Jammu, were constituted for the purpose during a Unified Headquarters meeting in Srinagar on September 29.

Both committees have Corps Commanders of Jammu and Srinagar besides the representatives of IB and CRPF as members, so GOI has always been a part of the deliberation and the question of formal request does not arise.

Soon after Omar announced on October 21, 2011 that AFSPA would be partially withdrawn it raised hackles within the Army, which opposed it tooth and nail. "Time has come for the revocation of laws (AFSPA and Disturbed Areas Act), which were introduced in the state after the onset of militancy, from some areas of the state within next few days. We have already identified the places from which the Act will be withdrawn, but I am not in a position to name those areas," Omar said in 2011. However, it could not be implemented. And on October 21, 2012 he reiterated his commitment at the same place i.e. Police complex Zewan saying: "Situation and circumstances allow revocation of AFSPA from certain pockets of JK. You have areas where there is no operational role of Army as the militancy in the state is at its lowest ebb. There are lesser casualties and therefore the situation is conducive for its revocation. I will pursue further for AFSPA revocation and it is worth a mission,"

So far those opposing AFSPA withdrawal have been proved to be more powerful than an elected chief minister. Omar's statement could not have been an ordinary one as he heads the Unified Headquarters; the high-powered body that synergies the anti-militancy grid comprising various forces. In any case, the

UHQ must have the final word on whether the situation was conducive for such a step and Omar as a disciplined politician must not have gone beyond a framework set for such big leaps. At the same time, if the sources are to be believed Omar had the patronage of the then Home Minister, P Chidambaram and he too was in favour of such a step.

Nearly two years have passed since he made the announcement but there is no movement forward and the issue has only become stuff for media headlines. The way Omar spoke on March 5 in the Assembly in the aftermath of killing of a youth Tahir Ahmad in Baramulla at the hands of Army showed nothing but New Delhi's assertion that Jammu and Kashmir cannot be empowered politically. The way chief minister seemed isolated on the issues concerning people, it raised eyebrows as to how Delhi has refused to learn from the past mistakes. Withdrawal of AFSPA in any case is in the interest of Delhi to restore confidence and trust among the people. It will also help the Army to set up an inbuilt mechanism to keep a check on the wrongs committed by its rank and file. And above all there is a demand from political parties across the board that time has come to withdraw the Act. One of the Working Groups set by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2006 and headed by Hamid Ansari (current vice president) too had strongly advocated the revocation of AFSPA.

While Army has its own reservations about its withdrawal but those cannot make the efforts to bring lasting peace hostage for so long. The demand for the revocation of the Act has become viable in the past few months, keeping in view the denial of justice to the victims who have fallen prey to unbridled powers under this Act. Take the case of families of five innocent civilians of Pathribal who were killed in a fake encounter in the aftermath of massacre of 35 Sikhs in Chattisinghpora in March 2000. Even the Supreme Court refused to grant permission that the officers be prosecuted. This is despite a strong case made by Central Bureau of Investigation. Likewise the cases of fake encounters in Ganderbal, Machil and Bandipore are meeting the same fate as Army refuses to co-operate and they do it under the "immunity" they enjoy with AFSPA in force.

Jammu and Kashmir has surely seen a tough time with violence taking a heavy toll on people. But in the past few years we had moved a lot towards what GoI itself calls as normalcy with dwindling numbers of militancy, restoration of democratic institutions and notably large participation of people in Panchayat elections. Delivery of justice to the victims of violence is the first step towards achieving the goal of political stability, which could pave way for

resolution. But as long as it is seen as a law and order problem and pump more and more forces, it will complicate the situation. Footprints of forces must be removed from the scene so should government come clean on the laws that infringe upon the civil liberties of the people. By making the statements like the one by Mr Ramachandran, GOI is discrediting the Chief Minister and none else.

AFSPA revocation in Tripura, 2015

Tripura government's recent decision to revoke the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has once again kick-started the debate as to why Jammu and Kashmir cannot follow suit. But in case of J&K there is always much noise than action. Since 1996 when the elected governments came to power, political parties have used it as an issue to fetch votes. They have raised the pitch many a time but ultimately give up to Delhi's veto over the issue.

Tripura was brought under AFSPA in 1997 and Jammu and Kashmir in 1990. Tripura government justified the revocation by saying that it was not needed since militancy was almost gone. In case of Jammu and Kashmir, the situation is different today from what it was in 1990. If the militants were operating in thousands then, today they are just a few hundred. But the way the law has a psychological impact on the minds it has done more damage to the sense of normalcy than anything else. Why is AFSPA hated in Kashmir? To my understanding it is not just the law that has infringed upon the civil liberties in the state but it is the large number of armed forces that have been shadowing the people in the name of security. However, AFSPA has taken over the issue of this large presence since it is seen as a cover to those who have used their unbridled powers and escaped the law. Examples of Pathribal, Bandipore, Ganderbal, Handwara and Machil are still fresh in the minds of people and that is why the discourse for its removal has been set in the civil society.

The issue here is that can or will the state government moves towards its revocation. Technicalities apart, it is the political courage that determines a decision to do away with such a law that is seen as draconian. One thing, however, is clear that in the past Army has proven more powerful than the political leadership as far as its retention is concerned. Former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah made an announcement on October 21, 2011 that AFSPA would go soon. He presumably had the backing of the then Home Minister P Chidambaram but could not overcome the challenge thrown by Army. Omar too flip-flopped till the time he was out of power. With the new government of

“North and South Pole” in power, they too had to make it part of the “Agenda of Alliance” but there is no clarity in that as well.

“While both parties have historically held a different view on AFSPA and the need for it in the State at present as part of the agenda for governance of this alliance, the coalition government will examine the need for de-notifying ‘disturbed areas’. This, as a consequence, would enable the union government to take a final view on the continuation of AFSPA in these areas” reads the Agenda. Thus, it is clear that no firm position has been taken at this examination which could well take full six years of the government. The ball has also been finally put into Delhi’s court.

Past experiences have shown that the state government’s are hardly empowered, that too when they are in coalition with a national party to press for such a decision. More than a decade has been consumed in committees and reports but there is no headway. Looking back at the developments that have taken place vis-a-vis this demand, a formal discussion has been on since 2007 .

No less than a Working Group set up by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recommended its revocation as a major confidence building measure. The group headed by Mohammad Hamid Ansari (now the Vice President) had made it amply clear that it was necessary to do away with this Act as it impinges on the fundamental rights of the people.

“Certain laws made operational during the period of militancy (e.g. Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disturbed Area Act) impinge on fundamental rights of citizens and adversely affect the public. They should be reviewed and revoked. Law and order matters should be dealt with, to the maximum extent possible, through normal laws” read the recommendations of the group. Not only this group but the high powered Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission set up in wake of strong protests in Manipur, has also recommended the scrapping of this draconian law, which the experts believe does not conform to the strong democratic fundamentals India has.

In Kashmir it has been observed that under the shade of these laws first implemented through Governor’s Ordinance on July 8, 1990 and then extended through an Act of Parliament on September 10, 1990, the armed forces have misused their powers. Because the Act provides sweeping powers leading to making them immune to any misconduct. For example see Section 6 of the Act, “No prosecution, suit or other legal proceedings shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of the Central Government against any person in respect

of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of powers conferred by this Act".

Jammu and Kashmir has surely seen a tough time with violence taking a heavy toll. But in the past few years we had moved a lot towards what GoI itself calls as normalcy with dwindling numbers of militancy incidents, restoration of democratic institutions and notably large participation of people in the elections. Delivery of justice to the victims of violence is the first step towards achieving the goal of political stability, which could pave way for resolution. But as long as it is seen as a law and order problem, it will complicate the situation. Footprints of forces must be removed from the scene, so should government come clean on the laws that infringe upon the civil liberties of the people. So Jammu and Kashmir must emulate Tripura.

Chattergam Killings: Accepting the uncomfortable, 2014

Army's top commander in Northern region Lt Gen B S Hooda did something unusual on November 7. Accepting it as a mistake, he owned the responsibility for killing two unarmed teenagers by his soldiers on November 3 near Srinagar. After the initial gaffe, the Army for the first time realized that covering this brutal act under the ready-made excuse of militant "first opening fire" would not help. Before Hooda, Srinagar based Commander of 15 Corps Lt Gen Subrata Saha too had admitted that the rules of engagement were not followed by the troops of 53 Rastriya Rifles (a counter insurgency wing carved out of Army) when they showered bullets on four young men. This surely does not compensate the loss and is not going to neutralize the tempers that are still running high over this incident.

However, this is for the first time the Army has publicly acknowledged the wrong done by its men on the ground. In the past the theories of crossfire and militant attacks would be used as a cover up. This time Gen Hooda has also promised that the trial would be speedy and "justice will be done". This remains to be seen whether the Army Commander keeps his promise to deliver the justice. The kin of two innocent boys have turned down the relief offer of Rs 10 lakh, thus standing tall in this hour of tragedy.

Here the question is not of Army's public acknowledgement that its men did the wrong. It is also not known that which way the trial would move. In the past it has been seen that Army courts have failed in instilling confidence among the people as far as punishing the soldiers is concerned. The incident in Chattergam (in central Budgam district of Kashmir) should not been seen in isolation but in

the larger backdrop of a place that is highly militarized. The numbers vary between the separatist camp and the security establishment. Whether the separatist figure that more than 7 lakh troops are on the ground is correct or the "conservative estimate" of officials putting it at less than 5 lakh (including all forces), does not make much difference. It is actually the visibility of the troops, their conduct and the mechanism of delivering justice on the ground that matters more. The controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that the outgoing Chief Minister Omar Abdullah had assured would go during his tenure has worked as a strong tool to infuse confidence among the troops on the ground to do whatever they want.

Army's top officials do admit in private that the wrongs done by their men on the ground do not fit in their rules of engagement. And even the incumbent Corps Commander Lt Gen Subrata Saha admitted it publicly. But when it comes to the AFSPA it is like a raw nerve for them. What the troops of Rashtriya Rifles did on November 3 is the direct result of unaccountability that the system has strengthened over a period of time. Getting immune with the unbridled powers to shoot even on a hunch has made them trigger-happy. These powers are continued despite their (government) own admission that the number of militants in Jammu and Kashmir is not more than 200. And these powers were brought when the number of active militants in Kashmir ran in thousands. The indicators of normalcy, again according to government figures have undergone a drastic change. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah addressing at Police Commemoration day function on October 21 reiterated his demand for repeal of AFSPA arguing that the militancy has seen a sharp decline of 70 to 80 percent in past few years. Why then the number of troops on the ground remains same thereby leading to the situation like that of Chattergam? Army's stiff resistance to thinning out of troops and repealing AFSPA is based on the argument that no chances could be taken as the "success against militancy" needs to be consolidated. Through Defence Ministry, the Army emerged stronger than the all-powerful Home Ministry when the then Home Minister P Chidambaram was keen at bringing certain amendments in the law. The cabinet memo suggesting those amendments must be now gathering dust. Even if the premise that more concentrated effort is needed to prevent the rebirth of militancy is taken on its face value, then the security grid along the Line of Control needs to be strengthened rather than dominating the hinter land with olive green uniformed people. If the troops are withdrawn from populated areas and then shifted to borders to plug the infiltration routes that would help curtail the militant

movement. But in that case the Army and Border Security Force may feel more accountable before its system if everything is not plugged. In past the allegations that those guarding the borders also played role in facilitating militant entry into Kashmir have also raised eye brows.

Since the Army has failed to respect the institution of justice, no healing would matter this time. In past the Army put its foot down when it was about punishing those officers involved in fake encounter case of Pathribal in which five innocent civilians were killed and then labeled as “dreaded foreign militants”. Trial in Bandipore, Ganderbal and Machil fake encounters also is something that does not help it to restore its credibility. One odd case of punishing Major Rehman who was responsible for rape of women in Handwara is far less in weight to convince the people that justice would be done. Now that Gen Hooda and Gen Saha have assured that a speedy trial would be ensured, it is expected that the results are delivered in promised time frame.

Answer, however, lies in reorienting the Army and its behaviour. Withdrawal of troops coinciding with the repeal of AFSPA would make the Army normal in its conduct and help it to be less irritant on the ground. What is important is to respect the recommendations of Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission and Mohammad Hamid Ansari (current Vice President) headed Working Group on Kashmir that suggested roll back of this law. More than that the Army needs to change the glasses through which it sees every Kashmiri as a gun totting militants.

Four years after Machil Killings of 2010

When an Army court martial handed over life imprisonment to five of its men including a Colonel for staging a fake encounter to three Kashmiri youth in 2010, it evoked a mixed response. Families of the three civilians, who were picked up from a North Kashmir village, branded as “terrorists” and bumped off in Machil, close to Line of Control, did welcome the verdict but they wanted more. “Death for the killers”.

Ten days before this verdict, the Army had to face a huge embarrassment as its soldiers fired upon a moving car and killed two teenagers on the outskirts of capital Srinagar. Lt Gen Hooda, its top commander in Northern region had to accept it as a mistake and own the responsibility. Even on November 14, it came under criticism for allegedly killing a civilian in a gun battle with militants in South Kashmir. Same day a local MLA Abdur Rashid Sheikh in North Kashmir’s Handwara town made serious allegations against two Army

men for killing a civilian while being in civies. Army denied involvement but cases stand registered.

Amidst this din the “positive” verdict in Machil encounter could not make much impact. Even if the court martial awarding lifer to five guilty men is a significant development, since Army has been in denial mode for last over two decades, but the confidence that it could deliver justice is still eluding. There is a reason for that. Whatever wrongs done by Army and para-military forces such as Border Security Force and Central Reserve Police Force have made while fighting the militants have been brazenly covered up under the much-trumpeted “national cause”. Kashmiris have grudge against India’s national media as well which they believe have fallen in the trap of “nationalism” thus covering up the erring soldiers.

For Army, the controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), that gives immunity to its men, has come in handy to protect them. Past week, the former Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram termed AFSPA as “obnoxious” saying “it had no place in a modern, civilized country”. He as home minister is believed to have moved amendments in the law but for Defence Ministry’s opposition could not achieve his goal. On AFSPA’s continuation, noted journalist Kuldip Nayar opined in Deccan Herald that it needs re-look. “Powers to kill on suspicion is too sweeping for a democratic country,” he wrote .

Notwithstanding the fact that Lt Gen Hooda’s public acknowledgement in case of death of two teenagers and the Machil verdict are a departure from its conduct in last over 20 years, but a lot more needs to be done to restore the confidence among the people. According to an RTI reply by Jammu and Kashmir Home department on February 23, 2012, sanction is still pending in 70 cases. These are cases of alleged custodial killings and fake encounters in which Army men have been found involved in preliminary investigations. Once the state police or the government is convinced that an Army man is found guilty it approaches Defence Ministry for formal sanction to prosecute them, but in most of the cases it has been denied. Similarly the BSF has escaped with minor punishments. BSF courts have surely proceeded against its men and according to a reply under RTI it has punished more than 40 of its men in various cases of killing and rape since 1990. The punishments range from five years rigorous imprisonment to dismissal of, or reduction in service. But in a case like that of Sopore where on January 6, 1993 over 40 people were mowed down by BSF after a militant attack, it has been termed as a “mischief” and those involved were given a minor punishment.

Army’s refusal to cooperate with the civilian courts or to transparently conduct the trials in its courts have caused a major dent to people’s confidence. Pathribal is a classic case in this long list. Five civilians were picked up in March 2000, soon after militants massacred 35 Sikhs in Chattisinghpora in South Kashmir coinciding with then US President Bill Clinton’s visit to India. They were later branded as terrorists and their charred bodies buried in a remote area. Central Bureau of Investigation conducted a thorough probe and held five officers of Army including a Brigadier responsible for killing them in fake encounter. The case went to Supreme Court where CBI insisted on trial in a civilian court. Army put its foot down and decided to take it to its own court. The Army court absolved all of them. When a local lawyers’ body approached a lower court to seek the proceedings in the Army court it was denied.

Human rights defender Khurram Parvez believes that Machil verdict does not match with the commitment of justice. “The Indian army court-martial verdict is not a beginning or a water-shed moment for Jammu and Kashmir, but an illustrative case of the manner in which political considerations and interests of the Indian army overrule larger principles of justice and accountability” he said.

According to human rights organization Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society, the Army has so far held 58 court martials but punishment has been given in only two cases and others dismissed as minor ones. With a baggage of not doing much to deliver justice, this verdict has come at a time when Army was found involved in two more such incidents past week. AFSPA is being seen as a major source of strength for Army to have this immunity. Machil verdict has surely opened a new window but it needs to be extended to other cases that have mauled the justice.

Justice eludes

The army court martial announced in 2010 was welcomed in Kashmir Valley as it seemingly reversed the practice of defending the human rights violations on the part of the army. Over the 27 years of conflict in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), armed forces personnel have hardly ever been punished even when the cases of human rights violations were clearly established. Even if they were acted against, the punishments were either struck down by the civilian courts or by the army's higher-ups. However, the Machil case award appeared to have ensured that justice was going to be done. The five-year-long process culminated in awarding imprisonment to the army personnel and it raised hopes among the masses that things were turning around. But those hopes were short-lived since the Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) suspended the imprisonment sentence and granted bail to all the five in July.

The Machil fake encounter took place on 29 April 2010 in Sona Pindi in Machil sector. It pushed Kashmir into unprecedented turmoil that the then Omar Abdullah government failed to deal with. Soon after the news about the killing of three civilians—Shazad Khan (27), Shafi Lone (19) and Riyaz Lone (20)—of Nadihal village in Rafiabad came to be known, it literally set Kashmir afire leading to four months of unrest that left 120 people (mostly youth) dead in the police and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) firing. The police investigation garnered irrefutable evidence that did not leave any room even for the court martial to give the erring army personnel the usual "benefit of doubt." The army's court of inquiry began in July 2010 with the court martial proceedings starting in December 2013 and which took the bulk of evidence from the police investigations into account. The police had filed a charge sheet against 11 people.

The case was meticulously followed and it finally culminated in the confirmation of sentence to the five army personnel: the then four Rajputana Rifles Commanding Officer Colonel Dinesh Pathania, Captain Upendra (holding the field rank of Major), Havildar Devendra Kumar, Lance Naik Lakhmi and Lance Naik Arun Kumar. In September 2015, the then Northern Army Commander Lt General D S Hooda confirmed the sentence on the basis of unequivocal advice of his legal headquarters. This was indeed the first case (of such a magnitude) in which the army took upon itself the responsibility of punishing the guilty in this manner, though there are earlier instances of punishments given out to erring officers.

Hopes Dashed

The hopes that this was a welcome change were dashed with the AFT's suspension of the punishment and the complete disregard it showed towards the findings of the J&K police, the army court of inquiry and the court martial. Delivering the judgment, the AFT comprising Justice V K Shali and Lt General S K Singh said, "There was absolutely no justification for a civilian to be present at such a forward formation near LoC, that too during the night when the infiltration from across the border was high." This was stated, in spite of the fact that the three slain men were lured by an army source to Machil near the Line of Control (LoC) on the pretext of giving them jobs. Another frivolous argument that the AFT made while freeing the army men was to invoke the "Pathan suit" theory. They said, the accused persons were terrorists who have infiltrated from across the border or were crossing over to the other side cannot be ruled out because they were wearing pathan suits (a common attire of men, particularly Muslims, in South Asia) which are worn by terrorists.

They even got the dates wrong and mentioned October instead of April.

It dealt a severe blow to the confidence that had been restored, however slightly, and the families of the victims have threatened to hang themselves. Not only is Kashmir dismayed over this travesty but those associated with the process of taking the case to its logical conclusion are also disturbed. At least two army officers on the condition of anonymity told The Indian Express's Sushant Singh that they were upset by the AFT's decision. General Hooda told Singh "I can't comment on the AFT ruling. It's not really my place to do so. However, the case went through the whole process of the military judicial system over a period of more than five years. There are well established practices which were followed and any criticism of the Army is not really justified. (The Indian Express, 3 August 2017)

The manner in which the Machil fake encounter has been dealt with is in line with the pattern that has been followed and which denies justice to the victims of atrocities by personnel of the armed forces. There are many examples wherein justice still eludes the victims or their families despite due processes having taken place. The army plays the "veto" card since it enjoys unbridled powers and absolute cover in getting away with crimes which, if tried in a civil court, would invite severe punishment. We have the classic example of the infamous Pathribal fake encounter in which five officers, including a colonel who later retired as a major general, were found guilty in staging an encounter

and killing five civilians in March 2000, following the massacre of 35 Sikhs in Chattisinghpora in South Kashmir. The massacre coincided with the then US President Bill Clinton's visit to India. It was the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that had clinching evidence against the officers but in this case the Government of India refused permission to prosecute. The case went up to the Supreme Court, which gave the army the choice of holding a court martial or being tried in a civil court. The army decided to hold a court of inquiry and disposed off the case.

The power to choose the course of inquiry which has been vested with the army has indeed played a significant role in thwarting justice in such cases. Section 125 of the Army Act, 1950 allows it to choose between a regular criminal court and court martial and has continued to shield personnel of the armed forces from being tried in the former despite commission of grave human rights violations.

The section reads as follows:

"Section 125. Choice between criminal court and court-martial. When a criminal court and a court-martial have each jurisdiction in respect of an offence, it shall be in the discretion of the officer commanding the army, army corps, division or independent brigade in which the accused person is serving or such other officer as may be prescribed to decide before which court the proceedings shall be instituted, and, if that officer decides that they should be instituted before a court-martial, to direct that the accused person shall be detained in military custody."

Similarly, the powers vested in the army regarding prosecution of its personnel have also ensured that justice is not done as in the case of Pathribal. Essentially, whenever the government forces commit human rights violations, two legal provisions hamper accountability: first, the concerned personnel can choose the forum, and in most cases they choose the court martial and second, particularly after the Supreme Court decision in Pathribal, the need for sanction for prosecution of army personnel.

Hampering Accountability

The relevant sections of the various laws regarding prior sanction for prosecution of the armed forces include:

(i) Section 45(1), the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC)—Notwithstanding anything contained in Sections 41 to 44 (both inclusive), no member of the armed forces of the union shall be arrested for anything done or purported to be done by him in the discharge of his official duties except after obtaining the consent of the central government.

(ii) Section 197(2), CrPC—No court shall take cognisance of any offence alleged to have been committed by any member of the armed forces of the union while acting or purporting to act in the discharge of his official duty, except with the previous sanction of the central government.

(iii) Section 7, Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA)—Protection of persons acting in good faith under this act—No prosecution, suit or other legal proceeding shall be instituted, except with the previous sanction of the central government, against any person in respect of anything done or purported to be done in exercise of the powers conferred by this act.

Interestingly so far the AFSPA has not been invoked as there seems to be no need in view of the Army Act covering its interests.

Ironically, erring army personnel choose the civil courts when it comes to accidents, as they fear stern punishment from army courts on grounds of violating discipline. The case in which an army major was punished and dismissed from service with a sentence of seven years by the army court martial comes to mind. He later approached the civil court. Captain Ravinder Singh Tewatia and Special Police Officer (SPO) Bharat Bhushan were found guilty of raping two women at their home in Banihal in Doda district on 14 February 2000. Two separate charge sheets were filed in the court of the chief judicial magistrate Banihal. Finally, the court martial in this case confirmed the crime and the captain was punished. He approached the district court which refused to provide relief following which he challenged the ruling in the high court. The high court set aside the court martial judgment but the army appealed before a division bench where the case is pending.

The biggest hurdle against the basic principle of justice in cases of human rights violations by the armed forces' personnel is that both the Army and Border Security Force (BSF) Acts are silent about the right to defence of the victims in army courts, an example of which is the Pathribal case wherein no

relative of the victim was allowed to present their side. There is absolutely no provision for the victims to plead their case.

There are rare cases like that of Major Rehman Hussain who was dismissed from service on charges of rape in Handwara in 2005. A comprehensive report "Structure of Violence" compiled by the International People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Justice and Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP) and released in September 2015 points out that:

Military Tribunals compromise the basic principle of equality before the law or equal treatment before the law. While the Pathribal victims wait for justice, we know it is only when court-martials are replaced by an open, transparent and fair trial in a regular independent court system, can the victims of armed forces atrocities in Kashmir even begin to expect justice.

Against the common perception that the AFSPA gives impunity to the army personnel in conflict areas, the reality is that it is the Army Act and certain sections of the CrPC and various government orders that give full cover to erring officers and allow them to go unpunished. The Machil fake encounter was a test case for both the state and the centre as also the army. Even as the state government fulfilled its job of proving that the three civilians were innocent, the AFT had the last word in labelling them "terrorists" and letting the guilty out of jail.

Kupwara killings of 2016

Killing of five civilians at the hands of Army and Police in the border district of Kupwara last week came as a grim reminder of 2010 when the Valley was locked for more than three months and 120 civilians, mostly youth, fell to the bullets of forces. The April 12 incident in Handwara led to a cycle of violence, curfews and shutdown that continued for about a week.

Without dismissing it as just another incident in the 26-year-long armed conflict, there is a need to ponder over some harsh realities that exist on ground. It has thrown up a big challenge for Mehbooba Mufti, the first woman Chief Minister to administer in the words of Omar Abdullah "the most difficult in state in India".

The Trouble

Why and how the first bullet was fired in Handwara town on April 12 is almost known to everyone. But the reality beneath the outpouring in the wake of that incident needs to be understood. It all started with a young girl going to a public washroom located close to a bunker manned by the Army. A few boys who saw her going inside raised an alarm that an Army man tried to molest her. It soon engulfed the town in rage that resulted in death of three civilians, including a 21-year-old budding cricketer, another youth and a woman. It did not stop there. The death trail extended to neighboring Kupwara where a youth died after a teargas shell hit him and later an 18-year-old boy was killed by Army in Nutnusa. Every incident in Kashmir has many versions and this was not an exception.

The local population who took umbrage to Army man's intrusion stood by their version. But a video was released on social media showing the girl narrate what had happened that day. She exonerated the Army and blamed local boys for hounding her. Who recorded the video and who first released it is actually not known as it looked like a room in Police Station where the recording was done. But police denied its involvement. Army did something different, not usually done in such cases. They released it to media through their official email. It was obviously done to neutralize what the locals were saying. Human rights activists and civil society took exception as to how Army could release it. Questions were raised. The girl and her father were taken into "protective custody" by police.

A magisterial probe has been ordered and Army has also promised a fair investigation. Even if the video is genuine but the way it went viral and the motives were made known, it became doubtful. It became the victim of state's bad track record on human rights and credibility it was facing as an institution. Not only did human rights groups question its genuineness but her mother too said that she was coerced to give the statement. In this game of claims and counter-claims, the truth may not come out and even if it comes out it may turn out to be "my truth and your truth".

Disconnect

Why did the people around immediately believe what the boys, who saw the girl, claimed. Not only that an Army man was being heckled by a group of young men who they believed was responsible for “molestation”. It does not need rocket science to understand why people went up in arms. In spite of being in Handwara chowk for long time just like as “permanent residents”, the Army personnel are seen as outsiders. The deep sense of alienation on the ground does not welcome them. They have obviously failed to strike a chord with the local population, otherwise why would people not give them a chance to clarify. On the other hand, Handwara has enthusiastically taken part in elections. More than 70 percent people defied the Hurriyat boycott and voted Sajad Lone to the assembly. Sajad had joined hands with BJP shortly before the elections but that did not deter him from registering victory in two segments.

In flaring up the tension, the vested interest theory may be used to counter the argument. But the reality on the ground is that it is the political alienation that plays up on such occasions. Why should the Army, that claims to be for Awaam, come under attack like this and why would a situation like this one arise where an Army officer had to say “the life of ten soldiers was under threat in bunker”. Why should the Army of Awaam be under attack from the same Awaam. The way Army dealt with the situation resulted in death of three people. Firing was surely the first option used by them. There will be inquiries and probes but that will not bring Nayeem, Iqbal and Raja begum back. The disconnect between people and the state has been dispassionately discussed in these columns and no amount of ex gratia or development will counter the alienation.

AFSPA AS IMPUNITY

Besides the problems faced by police on ground in avoiding such incidents, it is largely the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) that leads to killings in such situations. In the past there have been more horrifying experiences where people have been fired at will. It is mainly because of the impunity with which such killings have taken place that you cannot expect a control.

There has been much hue and cry over AFSPA, but Army has always put its foot down. Both PDP and National Conference have been opposing it publicly and it became part of the “Agenda of Alliance” reached between the two

partners of present government. But it is unlikely that anything tangible could be done to do away with it.

Soon after Omar Abdullah announced on October 21, 2011 that AFSPA would be partially withdrawn it raised hackles within the Army, which opposed it tooth and nail. “Time has come for the revocation of laws (AFSPA and Disturbed Areas Act), which were introduced in the state after the onset of militancy, from some areas of the state within next few days. We have already identified the places from which the Act will be withdrawn, but I am not in a position to name those areas,” Omar said in 2011. However, it could not be implemented. And on October 21, 2012 he reiterated his commitment at the same place, which is Police complex Zewan, saying “Situation and circumstances allow revocation of AFSPA from certain pockets of JK. You have areas where there is no operational role of Army as the militancy in the state is at its lowest ebb. There are lesser casualties and therefore the situation is conducive for its revocation. I will pursue further for AFSPA revocation and it is worth a mission.” Omar demitted office in 2014 but AFSPA stayed on.

Withdrawal of AFSPA in any case is in the interest of Delhi to restore confidence and trust among the people. It will also help the Army to set up an inbuilt mechanism to keep a check on the wrongs committed by its rank and file. And above all there is a demand from political parties across the board that time has come to withdraw the Act. No inquiries will bring justice to victims until the Act is withdrawn.

No less than a Working Group set up by former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has recommended its revocation as a major confidence building measure. The Group headed by Mohammad Hamid Ansari (now the Vice President) had made it amply clear that it was necessary to do away with this Act as this impinges on the fundamental rights of the people. “Certain laws made operational during the period of militancy (e.g. Armed Forces Special Powers Act, Disturbed Area Act) impinge on fundamental rights of citizens and adversely affect the public. They should be reviewed and revoked. Law and order matters should be dealt with, to the maximum extent possible, through normal laws,” read the recommendations of the group. Not only this group but the high-powered Justice Jeevan Reddy Commission set up in wake of strong protests in Manipur has also recommended the scrapping of this draconian law, which the experts believe does not conform with the strong democratic fundamentals of India.

Murder of Parvaz Mohammad Sultan in 2003

On a chilly evening Parvaz Mohammad Sultan was giving final touches to his daily bulletin when two unidentified gunmen entered his Press Enclave office and fired at him from point blank. Left in a pool of blood, the 40-year-old editor of local news gathering agency News and Feature Alliance (NAFA), was shifted to hospital but he lost the battle with his life on the way. Parvaz was not the first journalist killed during the conflict in Jammu and Kashmir, but he left a trail of misery behind him with a young wife and three small children.

Parvaz hailed from a remote village of Khiram in south Kashmir. A talented guy, he tried his hand in writing and soon carved a space for him in the vernacular press. He worked in Al Safa, and then a leading Urdu daily published from Srinagar and also wrote analytical pieces for Urdu weekly Chattan.

Parvaz had also a stint as a reporter with Congress mouth piece Quami Awaz, published from Delhi. However, in 2000 he launched his own news service to give fillip to feature writing and received an encouraging response from the readers and news organisations. He also edited a local newspaper Wattan, though unofficially. It was owned by the infamous counter-insurgent turned legislator Javed Shah, who was also killed by militants in 2003.

Motive behind Parvaz's killing continues to remain a mystery, as has been the case with hundreds of killings added to the accounts of "unidentified" gunmen. This is true with the killing of 10 other journalists as well who fell to the bullets or blasts since the outbreak of armed rebellion in Kashmir in 1989. However, the grapevine is that Parvaz's death was connected to the inter group rivalry within a prominent militant organization. One version, not verified by Independent sources, is that he "was used by one faction", thus inviting trouble from the other. But his association with the newspaper owned by the counter insurgent can also not be ruled out as a provocation for his murder.

Like many other cases, this was also a "blind" case for police, who hardly bothered to go deep into the conspiracy and identify the killers. While a case was registered in Police Station Kothibagh (Srinagar) on January 31, 2003 under FIR no 13/2003, the police investigation has failed to identify the attackers and has not been expanded to a desired limit.

According to officials, who wished not to be named, the case has been closed as "untraced" in 2003 itself. "Untraced means we could not identify the attackers and could not reach to them so the case was almost closed," an official said. However, the police has mentioned that it was the handiwork of "militants".

The then Superintendent of Police Srinagar has also given a “clean chit” to Parvaz saying, “he had no connection with any militant or anti-national organization” .

With the militant link to the killing becoming apparent, the journalist fraternity in Srinagar also turned its back on the issue. There was no follow up to the case except the statements from the organizations such as Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Sans Frontiers who expressed their concern and demanded independent probe into the killing.

For the shattered family of Parvaz, survival was more important than following the case to get justice. His 29-year-old wife Shameema was a broken soul who mustered courage to get a government job as compensation to her husband’s death. She needed the job to grapple with the challenge of bringing up three small children and ensure their education. But there was more trouble in store for the hapless family. Severely affected by the shock of her husband’s death Shameema’s health deteriorated and she finally passed away just after doing the job for 18 months. This literally dismembered the family leaving the three children Sheema (11), Junaid (6) and Umar (3) at God’s mercy. There was nothing for them to fall back upon except an aging grandmother and an aunt (father’s sister) who was already married.

The arduous task to take care of three orphans was left to Parvaz’s mother Rehmati (75). She ran from pillar to post to see that the children do not die of hunger. From Deputy Commissioner’s office to Social Welfare Department, she managed to get a meager amount in the name of being a widow and tried to feed the children who are now in their teens.

“This has been the biggest challenge God threw upon me,” Rehmati says with tears rolling down her wrinkled cheeks. “First Parvaz’s father passed away in young age and now I have to take care of these grand children. Can misery be worse than this?” she asks.

With the help of some journalists and philanthropists she is managing to bring them up and give them education. For her to pursue the case against the killers has no meaning. “What will I get even if they are hanged?” she says. “I only want safe future for these three young children” adds Rehmati.

Ironically there is no welfare scheme for journalists and their families in the state. And the way the fraternity has ignored the sufferings of such families; it is difficult to see a better future for the sufferers. It is worth mentioning that Parvaz’s name figures among hundreds of journalists whose pictures are hanging as “heroes of freedom of press” at the Washington based Newseum.

But will such honors get the family out of the trauma and secure them the justice? The question is indeed difficult to answer.

June: Month of death and killings, 2017

The month of June that coincided with the holy month of Ramzan left a trail of bloodletting across Kashmir as the militants upped their ante against the forces, particularly targeting the Jammu and Kashmir Police. The government forces also intensified their operations, resulting in many civilian killings in the "collateral damage". Impact of this heightened tension was visible and it cast its shadow over Eid ul Fitr as well. Notwithstanding the fact that all the killings bring a sense of helplessness, the way the people at large have continuously supported the militants and helped them to escape the cordon by thwarting the operations launched by the forces depicts an alarming situation. Political conflict has changed its dynamics and the way it is subsumed in the fresh wave of violence does convey something else. When militancy started in 1987 it was the direct result of a situation of frustration that followed the continuous denial of political rights. Violence cannot be justified in any society as a means to achieve the political objective. However, New Delhi's betrayal with the people of Jammu and Kashmir created a space and allowed the new generation to embrace the arms. Former police chief of Kashmir, A M Watali, who was at the helm in late 80s when the armed rebellion broke out, gives a graphic account of how the seeds were sown for pushing the youth to the wall. In his just out memoir "Kashmir Intifada" he discusses in detail as to how New Delhi's consistent policy of disempowering Kashmiris led to something which perhaps Pakistan had failed to achieve in 1947 and 1965.

Though Kashmir witnessed a transition from violence to non-violence in mid 90s when the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) announced a unilateral ceasefire, it was not allowed to become an opportunity to lay foundation for a meaningful dialogue. Rather it was used to weaken the urge of people for peace. Despite the ceasefire, the JKLF leaders are on record of saying that more than 600 members of the organisation were killed, thus negating the spirit of reconciliation. The period between 2003 to 2007 threw another opportunity of bonhomie between India and Pakistan and the issue of Jammu and Kashmir remained in focus, but that was sadly followed by complete denial, thus again pushing the boys to militancy. Hanging of Afzal Guru was a turning point in this situation that opened the doors for locals to go back to what they had left. This not only turned the clock back in political terms

but it created a space for social sanction to militancy thereby bringing Hizbul Mujahideen back to the centre stage. The credit for Hizb's comeback also goes to its poster boy Burhan Wani who was killed a year ago.

Though security officials disagree that the situation is akin to 1990s, whatever is happening especially in South Kashmir is certainly significant. Involvement of general public in the armed resistance is something that makes it more critical than in 1990. Figures suggest that June was a bloody month that saw a spike in militancy related incidents with a much greater impact. In 13 incidents, 27 militants, 8 policemen, 6 civilians and an army soldier were killed thus making it an engaging month vis-a-vis militancy. The numbers may not be on the higher side but the way some top militants lost their lives and the killing of a Station House Officer in Achabal along with his five colleagues and lynching of a Deputy Superintendent of Police, it took the lid off the unknown layer of the impending trouble. Going back to the figures about the violence from January 2016 to June 2016 and comparing it with corresponding period in 2017 (January 2017 to June 2017) there is not much difference but the number of civilian killings has gone up with 21 deaths in 2017 as compared to seven in 2016. In the same period last year, 29 force personnel were killed as compared to 38 in 2017. Similarly, the number of militants killed has slightly gone up with 90 in 2017 against 79 in 2016. This also makes it clear that the involvement of civilians in resisting the operations has led to almost four-time increase in their killings in comparison to 2016.

As the graph of militancy has been on rise, a related development brings it into a new focus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to United States had a "gift" in store for him. A day before he arrived in US, the state department declared the Hizbul Mujahideen supremo Salahuddin as globally designated terrorist. Salahuddin who used to be Mohammad Yousuf Shah when he fought the assembly election in 1987 is the first militant to have been tagged like this. On the face of it, this declaration is symbolic as it will only restrict him from visiting US and owning assets in that country, which he otherwise would not do. However, it comes as a moral boost for New Delhi in its fight against "terrorism" and joining the league at international level. Pakistan has rejected this declaration and China has gone a step ahead in calling him a freedom fighter. That makes it amply clear that Kashmir is not just a bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan but it is part of a great game being played in the region in which the equations have gone through a new shift after the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became a reality and Russia too fell in

line. China has been blocking India's bid in United Nations Security Council as well when it comes to Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar being given the same title. It does not need much effort to understand whether China really supports violence by doing so. It certainly does it as a matter of policy to counter and in that case Kashmir already is in international attention. Pakistan's noted journalist Hamid Mir had rightly concluded in an article in Indian Express that US's action against Salahuddin very much indicated mediation on Kashmir. By declaring him global terrorist, Washington has gone against its long time policy of pushing both India and Pakistan to table considering that Kashmir's was a genuine political movement. Delhi also cannot shrug off the reality that it has in past engaged with Hizbul Mujahideen.

Today's BJP government may say they don't believe in engaging with those who challenge India's rule in Kashmir but the fact is that governments are governments and with the change in incumbents the reality cannot be altered .

Whatever the consequence of this declaration, it is hardly going to make an impact on ground in Kashmir. Local support to militancy has increased. Unless a political approach is adopted by the government, violence will continue to make headlines. And with provocations from the government in Delhi which are further supplemented by TV channels, there is hardly any chance and hope to see a change. Armed forces may go against the militants and kill them but recent trends have shown that more youth are joining the ranks. Apart from the political effort, improved governance, end to atrocities and random arrests are important issues that need to be looked at.

Human Shield: Army's jeep treatment, 2017

On April 9, a video was shot in which a Kashmiri youth who was identified as Farooq Ahmad Dar could be seen tied to the front of an army patrolling jeep in Budgam district of Kashmir. The video went viral in the state and evoked criticism from human rights bodies. It was widely reported on April 15, 2017. The Army major Leetul Gogoi defended the act saying that it saved 12 lives since the area was under stone pelting during bypolls.

For the past two weeks Kashmir has been in the grip of a commotion which may cast a shadow over the 2017 summer, much like the last year. Nothing seems to have changed in the last six months after unrest broke out with the killing of Burhan Wani which brought the valley to a grinding halt. The by-elections for the Srinagar parliamentary constituency returned the people's resistance to the spotlight.

The by-election recorded the lowest-ever turnout, placing a question mark over the relevance or presence of pro-India parties. Violence accompanied the boycott. The message came through loud and clear; the level of disaffection towards the system is complete and the cry for “Azadi” has become louder. The way people resisted elections in which they had once participated in large numbers shows just how much Indian influence has left its mark on the ground. Those in the mainstream admit (privately) that their days seem to be over as “it is difficult to stand against the dominant narrative, right or wrong”. What made the situation worse is the treatment meted out to commoners at the hands of the police, paramilitary forces and the army while fighting back the boycott. Eight civilians were killed and scores others were injured, adding to the seething anger. Some videos went viral to devastating effect.

The jeep effect

One video showed civilian Farooq Dar of central Kashmir's Beerwah tied to the front of a jeep by the army for about 22 kilometers as a human shield to keep the stone pelters at bay. People went hysterical when they saw the video that was everywhere on social media. Saner voices across India expressed shame too. Lt Gen (retd) HS Panag, who once headed Northern Command in Udhampur, was almost in shock when he tweeted that this video would haunt the Indian Army and Indian nation for times to come. For some, demeaning a human being was worse than death. Ironically, Farooq Dar had cast his vote a short while before it happened.

The Indian Army has been fighting a battle with militants in Kashmir for the last 26 years but it has tried to take the middle ground amid serious allegations of human rights violations. For most of the time it has tried to keep a distance from politics and has tried hard to get closer to the people. Lt Gen DS Hooda, who headed the Northern Command till recently, had sounded the alarm, asking all parties to step back (during the height of the 2016 unrest) and had conveyed that the army was apolitical.

Indeed, the army's mega "Sadbhavna" project has been implemented in every nook and cranny of the state with daily press releases showing the close contact with the people through goodwill camps. An estimated Rs 400 crores have been spent in Kashmir under this programme, which the army maintained, was to win hearts and minds. In an analysis of this project, Arpita Anant, a fellow at the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, concluded in 2010 that it had a "positive impact" on relations between the army and the people. But she also added that "the comfort level between the military and the people seemed higher in the Jammu region than in the Valley". This makes for interesting reading; despite pumping in so much money, the army did not achieve the impact it desired.

Even if Sadbhavna had succeeded in reaching out to the people, the jeep video would have undone any good. A few other videos have similarly sent shivers down the spines of the people after seeing young people beaten and forced to shout pro-India and anti-Pakistan slogans at gunpoint.

TV channels have been holding debates on another video in which a Central Reserve Police Force jawan is being heckled by some young men. Not only the anchors but India's Attorney General Mukul Rastogi and BJP's general secretary Ram Madhav too justified this action making it amply clear that the

methodology has the official sanction. Madhav is interestingly in charge Kashmir and has been the architect of so called agenda of Alliance between BJP and PDP.

People ask how the conduct of a “disciplined” force can be equated with that of a mob? So far the forces have had the bullet as the last resort but these videos have taken the lid off bizarre conduct. Leaking videos (as it was reportedly shot by the army) is to then send a message? This kind of conduct completely defies the logic of “Sadbhavna”. Moreover what is important to note is that the BSF jawan who released a video on unfair treatment meted out to force was dismissed from the service, but in this case those who leak these videos are defended. That implies the design is to threaten and make it clear to people how they could be treated.

Has the army had to go to this extent against its civilians because it failed to win hearts and minds? The army might have been able to kill militants in the numbers but the ideology that is taking shape among the average youth is more powerful than that of the militants. This thinking cannot be killed by force as it has a strong political context. It is the political dimension of the problem that needs to be approached through political means. The army is seen as a tool New Delhi uses to control Kashmir but it has not worked. The video tells the story that the army has failed to even make its own methods work. With this conduct it has failed Kashmir and made New Delhi vulnerable at the international level.

Rising militancy

The government's challenge is to contain public anger but increasing militancy is just fuelling it. Last Monday's student protests across Kashmir show how the anger is systematically shaping. It has been students who have been killed in the recent past. They are the ones who come out on the streets. They join the ranks of militants. The political conflict has made deep inroads into their minds.

Perhaps the Separatist leaders who are leading the "movement" have no clue about the direction in which we are headed. The numbers of young people joining militancy are alarming. The ratio of foreigners and locals was 70:30 but today, according to officials, it is the opposite. Official sources reveal that in 2010 the number of youngsters who joined militancy was 54. It dropped to 23 in 2011 and there was a further decline to 21 and 16 in 2012 and 2013. But it went up to 53 in 2014, 66 in 2015 and 88 in 2016. Till March 2017, sources say 19 boys had joined the ranks. Government officials admit that the hanging of Afzal Guru proved to be a turning point.

New Delhi continues to be in denial. There is an absence of political engagement. At the societal level there is hardly any effort being made to figure out what will happen next. How long will Kashmir's youth be consumed in the cycle of violence and will it be in our interest to continuously push them into it further? Civil society and the political leadership are silent.

Resolving political issues are long-drawn out battles and unless there is a thought process to guide it, the results are not difficult to imagine. One can only denounce the humiliation the army and other forces have heaped on Kashmir. The video shows that the battle has been lost. That might have become our fate but surely we must still try to ensure no more lives are lost.

LOCAL POLITICS

State Assembly elections were held in five phases from 25 November – 20 December 2014.Its results were declared on 23 December 2014.With a total voter turnout of 65 percent, it produced split mandate with the people in Kashmir region voting in favour of PDP. NC and in Jammu region in favour of BJP.PDP won 28 seat, followed by BJP which won 25, NC 15 and INC 12.

Before the assembly poll bugle, July 2014

With Congress and National Conference deciding to go alone in the forthcoming Assembly elections, the electoral battle in Jammu and Kashmir is poised for an interesting contest. In both the Kashmir and Jammu divisions a triangular contest could throw up some surprises. The ruling coalition partners are, however, making some "thought provoking" statements as to why they parted ways. The NC holds the view that it was not possible to transfer the votes of their respective cadres but Congress has made some interesting point. Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief Saifuddin Soz blamed the government inefficiency and corruption for the debacle both the parties had to taste in the recent parliamentary elections.

Generally the coalition parties should have been highlighting the joint achievements and even if they had to fight elections on their own, the reasons could be different. But this is perhaps the only coalition in India that is parting ways on the basis of misgovernance. Soz blames the government of which his party is a part as corrupt. That means whole lot is indulging in corruption. But if NC leaders are to be believed they maintain that Congress ministers were more corrupt. One thing is clear that both NC and Congress have vindicated the people's verdict they gave in recent elections. It reversed all the decisions it had taken in past five years proving that it had no competence to comprehend what was good for state. Coalition government's failure to tackle the corruption was main reason for mis-governance and that is why the people rejected them in Lok Sabha elections. In normal circumstances it would have been ideal for both parties

to join hands and go to polls with the “achievements” of six years but they are instead blaming each other for the failures.

Now that the scene is clear all the parties have their knives out to realize the dream of governing the state until 2020. The magic number of “44” is lurking in the minds of these political parties and some of them claim they will achieve it on their own. What is surprising is that the right wing Bhartiya Janata Party has been talking more about “44” given the fact that the results of recently held parliament elections bolstered its confidence. The opposition People’s Democratic Party, though not publicly, is also counting the same figure and is confident to repeat the performance it showed in the parliamentary elections.

But Congress and NC are two parties, which are yet to make a tall claim of reaching the magic number. Demoralized with the rout they faced in the elections, they even changed the language generally used to nail the opponents. Whatever way the campaign goes but one thing is clear that the dynamics of the electoral politics has certainly changed in the state. With people making a beeline to join PDP, it has become clear that the results of the parliamentary elections are being taken seriously and the party is rather expected to repeat the performance in the Assembly elections.

It is very difficult to predict any clear situation as the previous elections were fought for parliamentary seats and the forthcoming one is meant for Assembly. Though not much difference is expected, it largely is the election, which has lot to do with the local candidate, whether from NC, PDP, Congress or BJP. If the reports are to be believed, one of the strongest candidates of Congress in Jammu shut his eyes for people voting for BJP candidate in parliament elections thus giving a stunning lead of over 50,000 to Jugal Kishore in this particular segment. But when it comes to his own election it may be different even as it will be difficult for him to reverse the trend to which he contributed himself.

If the claims of BJP and the independent assessments are taken into consideration, Modi wave still exists in Jammu and in case the BJP’s plan of sending 22 Union Ministers and the Prime Minister for campaigning materializes it surely will have its own impact. BJP is trying its best to appease its vote bank by continuously talking about the rehabilitation of Kashmiri Pandits, refugees and the other contentious issues to lure the voters ahead of the Assembly elections. It may not be in a position to fulfill

its wish list but it surely will gain and that will be at the cost of Congress and to some extent the NC. It has also started roping in some new faces in Valley to make inroads. It's working on an arithmetic that may suit it in view of boycott, particularly in Srinagar city. Riding on the goodwill the party has among KP's it is concentrating on a few seats in Srinagar so that the bulk of KP's would vote for its candidates who could sail through in view of near total boycott.

In case the trend that had been set after 2002 in Jammu and Kashmir gets reversed, Congress will no longer be in a position of being the "King Maker" in state politics. Since 2002 the state has seen the coalition politics thriving and smaller parties and even individuals emerging as potential gainers. Congress with substantial numbers played the role of having the key to formation of governments. It did pave way for Mufti Mohammad Sayeed to become Chief Minister in 2002 despite his party PDP having only 16 members against Congress's 20. And in 2008 it joined hands with NC to form the government. In both these tenures Congress used rather misused its position to get the maximum. First by running away with important and "lucrative" portfolios and then "black mailing" the chief ministers of PDP and NC on almost every issue.

This time, however, Congress seems to be on the back foot as the rout the party faced at national level and in the six parliamentary constituencies of J&K has given a severe jolt to its morale. Political pundits are not predicting immediate revival in its fortunes. If that would be the case then a new dynamic will be thrown up in the state. But it depends a lot on how NC will fare in the assembly elections. If it goes down drastically on its existing number of 28, that would be advantage PDP.

The concern rather a threat that will emerge in case voters do not prefer both NC and Congress is that BJP will have an edge in deciding the future coalition. The coalitions even with Congress, presumably the secular party, have turned out to be very unfriendly for Kashmir. If one would go to the extent of saying that Congress ministers have proved to be more communal than BJP it would be fair. In their 12 years of rule, Congress ministers, mostly from Jammu have not allowed any Muslim to hold an important position such as that a head of a department or equivalent in Jammu region. There are many more examples like that. But in case a single party from Kashmir does not get a comfortable majority on its own, then it will be at

the mercy of BJP and other forces who are essentially nurturing anti-Kashmir feeling in Jammu.

Imagine BJP winning nearly 20 seats and a party from Kashmir left with no choice but to join hands with them to form a government. BJP is eyeing 44 seats, which is very difficult to comprehend at this stage. Since NC conceded its whole space in Jammu to Congress, the voters both Muslims and those who don't support BJP's agenda were left with no choice but to go with them. Congress's misrule and its failure to replace a regional party like NC in Jammu paved way more for BJP than for another regional party PDP, which has surely improved its vote bank in the region. In both Kashmir and Jammu it is going to be a triangular contest with BJP, Congress and NC fighting a tough battle in Jammu along with PDP in certain areas, in Kashmir the battle is mainly between NC and PDP with Congress having strong base in few constituencies.

While all the prophecies about the results are premature at this stage, 44 and 2020 are important figurative signs for the health of Jammu and Kashmir for next six years.

44+ and the elephant in the room, October 2014

A massive campaign was launched in Jammu and Kashmir by BJP that was eyeing on winning more than 44 seats to make the government itself without any parties support.

Jammu and Kashmir is now gearing up for a major political battle. Despite stiff opposition from ruling National Conference, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has gone ahead with the scheduled polls. NC virtually was singled out in an overwhelming feel of preparedness among rest of political parties and the state administration. Interestingly, the administration ruled by NC had a different take and the way they expressed readiness to EC also makes it clear how distant the Chief Minister and his colleagues have been from the administration.

Elections and Floods

Notwithstanding the fact that Kashmir is yet to recover from the calamitous catastrophe that hit it on September 7, holding of elections has become a reality now. Going by the argument put forth by the administration that only eight assembly constituencies were affected by the floods, this may sound logical. But the fact is that the setback people have received in general has not left any scope for an exercise called elections. However, the fact is that rehabilitation of these victims needs to be done by the government and if it was left to the present regime that miserably failed people in rescue and relief, one could imagine the fate of the already suffering victims. Was then the Governor's rule an option – is a question one could debate .

But all parties, other than NC have been vociferously advocating for polls on time. For them it is the best time to use the failures of Omar Abdullah led coalition to their benefit. What is amusing is the reaction of NC saying that they had opposed the elections as the relief and rehabilitation of flood-hit people was a priority. But looking back at past one month's engagements and the decisions of the government one can hardly see anything that would substantiate the statements of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and his party general secretary Ali Mohammad Sagar. Since the EC had made its mind known about the elections a few weeks back, the coalition government jumped to do anything they had not done in past six years.

Showing contempt to the miseries of the flood hit people they tried to "reap the harvest" even if it was flood soaked. The government led by the NC, shamelessly approved 400 more administrative units, putting a burden on the state exchequer and demolishing the concept of institutions such as Sub Divisional Magistrate, Tehsildar and Naib Tehsilar. In one such area in North Kashmir's Rafiabad there are three tehsils within the radius of three kilometers. They also blatantly upgraded 800 health centres and equal number of educational institutions without the prior concurrence from Finance and Planning departments. This was only done to reach out to their vote bank. But where are they taking the state that has the dubious distinction of being with the begging bowl all the time. The NC ministers hardly toured the flood-hit areas to take stock of the needs of the people,

instead they were seen busy flashing pictures of inaugurating the Treasuries, Tehsils, Degree Colleges and Polytechnics. In run up to the elections and in absence of any accountability the coalition did everything illegal and impractical they could do under the sun.

The Big battle

Now that the bugle is sounded, the fight is going to be interesting. Since 2002, the state has seen a coalition government. For two terms the Congress emerged as a king maker as it could get a sizeable number of seats, mostly from Jammu. But the parliament elections held in May this year have upset their fortunes. In Jammu and Ladakh all the three seats went to Bhartiya Janata Party and that was the “stronghold” of Congress. Similarly the Peoples Democratic Party wrested all the seats from National Conference in Kashmir. Even as there will not be a bigger change in the players but the emergence of BJP on the scene is surely going to change the electoral arithmetic in the state.

The BJP’s dream of having 44+ may not realize but the indicators suggest that it will emerge as a force to reckon with. In Jammu the BJP has made an impact after sweeping the Lok Sabha elections and fever has not gone down since. The party is eyeing a major chunk out of 37 seats in Jammu division. Though 15 seats have Muslim majority, but BJP is recasting its Uttar Pradesh plan of counter polarization and consolidating the Hindu vote. This is a possibility, as the rest of the votes will be divided with three major political parties National Conference, PDP and Congress in the fray. The four cornered contest, in many seats. In Jammu it is advantage BJP. Whatever number BJP is able to make in Jammu will be at the cost of Congress and to some extent NC. With the Lok Sabha wave of Modi sweeping the Jammu voter, the recent skirmishes along the border and a “tough response” by Narendra Modi government is also playing for the BJP. Taking a tough stand against Pakistan has its own advantage in Jammu and that is why the Modi government chose to give “powers” to forces to take on their Pakistani counterparts. Moreover, the results of Haryana and Maharashtra elections too will have an impact on voters in Jammu. BJP may not be able to fulfill its dream of getting “many seats” in Kashmir but the chance of having a single seat dominated by Kashmir Pandits cannot be ruled out.

In the wake of BJP emerging as a power, the balance will tilt. In case the grand win for BJP in Jammu becomes a reality, it will upset the applecart of PDP and NC. For both of them Congress as a “secular” party is the best

option to join hands for the government. But if it is BJP and for PDP or NC emerging as the biggest parties it will be too difficult to navigate through the saffron surge to come to power. But if political grapevine is to be taken seriously, BJP's ambition is on a much higher pedestal. It is aiming at 44 and the Hindu Chief Minister in Jammu and Kashmir. That may be too much to aspire for but to emerge, as a bigger force is not ruled out.

Between boycott and ballot, December 2014

Huge turnout in the first and second phase of polling in Jammu and Kashmir has baffled many. Many people saw this turnout as something unprecedented due to the fact that people in the state in general and in Kashmir valley in particular had locked horns with the Indian state over the resolution of the political dispute. And reposing faith in the electoral system is seen by many as rejection of separatism in Kashmir. It is a fact that the separatists who have been spearheading the movement for right to self-determination had called for a boycott and people who voted did not pay heed to it.

I remember covering the first election after insurgency in Kashmir. In May 1996, the general elections were held in India and the National Conference, the premier regional party had then boycotted the same making the restoration of Autonomy as a pre-condition. This threw a major challenge to New Delhi. But they went ahead and announced that Jammu and Kashmir would go for elections after a gap of seven years. It was to set the stage for the Assembly elections that followed in September that year. I along with other colleagues was very keen to report the first electoral exercise. And not taking any chances of being stopped en route either by protesters or the Army, we decided to reach Baramulla a day ahead. All of us stayed at the house of Late Ghulam Jeelani Baba, the long time and versatile stringer for many newspapers. His warmth of hospitality helped all of us to engage in lively discussions dealing with pros and cons of the elections and the possibility of the turnout.

As we began our day, the atmosphere was tense and there was no sign of people taking part in the elections. Heavy deployment of troops had turned the election areas into garrisons .

It appeared as an alien exercise not only because of the ubiquitous presence of Army men on the streets but also due to the presence of employees from other states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh who conducted the elections. The local government employees had stayed away from the election duties.

We were just waiting for the first “brave voter” to appear on the scene. At many booths we waited for long time until the columns of Army moved in action. They literally dragged people to polling stations forcing them to repose faith in Indian democracy. There was resistance but ultimately there was a percentage at the end. This was the scene almost everywhere in Kashmir. Most of the people managed to stay away. But still elections were held.

Three months later Government of India took the plunge to hold Assembly elections. Not much had changed except that the pro-government Ikhwan had an upper hand as far as the security environment was concerned. Delhi was seriously lacking legitimacy in holding the polls as people had put up stiff resistance. National Conference sensed trouble of being out of the political arena forever. It did not wait and jumped into the fray without asking for Autonomy. If sources are to be believed, Farooq Abdullah was told that a senior separatist leader was ready to lead the polls and he would be installed as Chief Minister. This enticing approach made him rethink and he decided to move in. Almost a similar exercise like the one in May was repeated. Again the employees were imported from other states and with an element of coercion the percentage went up.

At many booths people openly said they were caught between three guns — that of militants, counter-insurgents and Army and they want to get rid of it “so a civilian face was must”. Thus NC came to power.

Over a period of time the elections started acquiring legitimacy and the people came out on their own to vote the way they did this time. People’s involvement with political parties and their stakes in the matters of governance in the shape of getting government jobs, par taking the contracts and other benefits increased. These sops, which came in various forms, worked and New Delhi was able to bribe the people, so all the elections held after 2002 saw a significant turnout.

The “huge” turnout witnessed in first and second phase is nothing new about which people should be surprised. This is simply people’s urge to be

part of the governance to improve their quality of life, make their representatives accountable.

The turnout must not be mixed with the large political discourse in Kashmir. If the elections are a referendum or authenticates accession then why would people take to streets in tens of thousands in 2008, 2009 and 2010? Why would we see thousands of people attending the funeral prayers of militants? Even in second phase held on December 2, the boycott was witnessed in parts of Kashmir. How would that be interpreted then? People in those areas not only boycotted but also chanted pro-freedom slogans.

Boycott has been in fact an inalienable part of Kashmir politics right from 1947. In 1951 when the Constituent Assembly was to be chosen, 73 out of 75 members were elected unopposed. The boycott was called by Muslim Conference in Kashmir and Parija Parishad in Jammu. Later on during Plebiscite Front all the elections from 1955 to 1972 were boycotted by the major political players. However, one thing that needs to be underlined is that the separatists also should introspect and rethink over the strategy in view of rejection of boycott call. It does not mean that they have been rejected but they must place the argument that elections are for governance and have nothing to do with right to self-determination in the centre of their future course of action.

In fact those who voted have themselves offered a face saving to separatists by drawing this distinction. When asked about their decision to vote, a group of enthusiastic youth said though they are azadi supporters but they want to see a particular candidate to come to power. “After that, we will lay our lives for Geelani sahib. We protested in 2008 and 2010 agitations, and our friend Irfan was killed by the army in 2013. But we want justice to be done with us,” they added. This quote is enough to understand the dichotomy of elections and boycott .

West Pak refugees in context, January 2015

A simmering discord on the communal lines is again threatening the unity of Jammu and Kashmir, akin to what we saw in 2008 when Amarnath land row hit the fragile relations between two regions of Kashmir and Jammu. The issue is limited to the rights of few lakh people (refugees) from West Pakistan and may not attract overwhelming support from all the people of

Jammu, keeping in view their experience of business losses in 2008. However, the political atmosphere is charged and this time the public opinion seems to be synergizing among many sections of people in Kashmir, who see it as a machination to change the demography of a Muslim-majority state.

A simple recommendation by Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) suggesting voting and other rights for these refugees has stirred a storm, that too at a time when Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are negotiating government formation. Both parties have divergent ideologies and this issue is part of that discourse. Notwithstanding the fact that the refugees who have been settled in Jammu in 1947 are facing problems and need to be addressed with a humane approach but that surely is destined to come at a high cost of the unity of the state. This not only has opened up a genuine debate in Kashmir in the backdrop of Sangh Parivar's divisive agendas such as "Ghar Wapsi" (reconverting Muslims and Christians) in India but it must be looked into the context of overall displacements in the state that have taken place since 1947.

The West Pakistan Refugee Organisation (WPRO) president Labha Ram Gandhi claims that there were only 5764 families who migrated in 1947, and have now grown up to 25,460, (making it roughly to 1.5 lakh), those who have worked on the subject have a contrary view. According to a scholar who has worked on Jammu Muslims, the number of families at that time was nearly 12,000 and that must have grown up by 50,000 roughly making it a population of about three lakh souls. "There are many families who had not registered with the organization," he says. Whatever the actual figure, granting of rights to them is seen more with political motives than treating it as a humane issue. With BJP making it a poll plank and Prime Minister Narendra Modi talking about it in election rallies, the recommendations of JPC are seen as a move that could be implemented. As of now the recommendations are hanging between Delhi and Jammu as no government is in office. The most contentious issue that involves the recommendations is that of granting voting rights for assembly to the refugees. It will in the longer run help those forces who want to see Jammu at par with Kashmir in terms of number of seats to pave way for power in the state without being dependent on voters in Kashmir. Though the delimitation of assembly constituencies is frozen till 2026, this move could

work towards realizing the goal of those parties who have been thriving on the bogey of discrimination and “Kashmir domination”.

With this issue occupying much space in public discourse there is no word on other displacements. A pertinent question, which merits an answer, is that why these refugees were pushed to Jammu in 1947 and not to any other part of India. As the things unfolded, it was clear that it was aimed at changing the demography of the state. Jammu region had Muslim majority and besides massacring more than 3 lakh Muslims, this could be one way to fill in that gap. The shaking Dogra monarchy’s parting “gift” to its subjects who had been faithful to them for more than a century was the massacre. For example, today, the Muslim population in Jammu district is five percent as against 39 percent in 1947 and similarly against 30 percent in Kathua district it is eight percent.

In order to facilitate the return of the Jammu and Kashmir refugees living in Pakistan, Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah had brought Resettlement Bill also known as Bill No 9 in 1977. It was aimed at opening the doors for those state subjects who had migrated till 1954. The bill is still undecided in Supreme Court.

Around 12 lakh refugees from Jammu and Kashmir live in mainland Pakistan. Out of them nearly 11 lakh hailed from erstwhile Jammu and Kathua districts. The way they were massacred and hounded out of their homes is narrated by distinguished journalist Ved Bhasin. In a chilling account he told Srinagar based Kashmir Life in an interview on October 9 2003 that it was well planned by Mahraja’s government and RSS.

“Once Mir Chand Mahajan (PM) came to Jammu, when communal riots were taking place. He invited some minority leaders, including from communal parties and National Conference. Trilok Chand Dutt was there, Girdhari Lal Dogra was there, and Om Saraf was there. I was also there as a students representative. At the Maharaja’s Palace, he said the power is being transferred to people of J&K state so why don’t you Hindus and Sikhs demand parity. Parity means, equal representation to Hindus and Muslims as the Muslim League at some time in India had said. No one replied except Om Saraf. He said that how can we demand parity. There is so much difference in the population of Hindus and Muslims. Muslims are a vast majority, Hindus are a small minority. How is it practical and possible? At this Mir Chand Mahajan pointed to a forest area down the Maharaja

Palace, where there were some Gujjar bodies, who had been recently killed. He said that the population could also change. So what did he mean by that?" Bhasin said. These refugees also do not have complete rights except that they have eight seats reserved in AJK Assembly."

On 25th anniversary of migration by Kashmiri Pandits on January 19, noted journalist Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar wrote in The Times of India that what happened to Jammu Muslims in 1947 must not be forgotten. "Although our media pride themselves on free and bold speech, they maintain a conspiracy of silence on some issues relating to the supposed 'national interest'. This includes the mass killing and expulsion of lakhs of Muslims from Jammu in 1947. That story should be recalled on this somber anniversary" he wrote.

While there is much cry about the WP refugees, no one talks about those who migrated to Pakistan not only till 1954 but after 1990 when they could not stand cross border shelling and firing along Line of Control. Numbering more than 35,000 they are living a tough life in Pakistan Administered Kashmir. Both the issues of return of Kashmiri Pandits and those who were forced to migrate to PaK must be dealt with uniformity. Moreover, the issue of WP refugees having potential of putting an already divided (communally) state at the brink of disintegration must be addressed outside the purview of voting and state subject rights. One wonders that when the same parliamentary committee reports, Justice Jeevan Committee report, Prime Ministers Working Group reports are ignored in case of revocation of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), how can these be sacrosanct in such cases.

PDP's gamble, February 2015

Eight-week-long suspense over the government formation is now all set to end with Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reaching an agreement to shape up the alliance for new dispensation. On the face of it the only thing that is common among the two is "P" (Party), but with consensus on a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) they seem to have created a space where they could move together in governing the state for next six years.

As I write these lines, even broad contours of the CMP are not known and the only thing that both parties confirm is that the talks are over and formal announcement is the next thing to do. For BJP, the election results were a windfall as it improved its position from 11 seats in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly in 2008 to 25 in 2014. In 2002 it had just one MLA in the house. Its blitzkrieg of "Mission 44 +" worked out well to touch the highest ever mark of 25. So the next move was to be in the power structure as it was a "now or never" situation for the party that is in full command of centre, in Delhi. To be a power player in the only Muslim majority state is surely a dream come true. Its ascendency in J&K was no different from what it did in rest of India in 2014 general elections. Here too the communal polarization worked as a spinner in the game.

In contrast, the mandate in Kashmir valley was fractured. Commentariat in Kashmir concluded that the vote in Valley was to stop BJP's entry into the power structure. It is a known fact that BJP never had a foothold in Kashmir and it tried all means to do that in the recent elections but failed miserably by losing the security deposit in 33 out of 34 assembly segments. Nevertheless, its money game did fetch some results, like the party candidate getting over 3000 votes in Shopian and 2500 in Hazratbal, the highest number so far that too excluding Kashmiri Pandit migrants, who interestingly stayed away from polls, apparently to shun the tag of being pro BJP. Voting pattern in Valley was not overwhelming for a particular party, so it did not prove to be decisive. Whether BJP really was a factor merits a debate. If that would be the case Sajjad Lone's Peoples Conference would not have registered a debut victory on two seats in Kupwara, since he shook hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi much before the elections. It needs to be taken into consideration that Valley, despite huge turnout, was divided and not decisive.

Now that PDP patron Mufti Mohammad Sayeed has moved ahead for an "unholy alliance" with BJP, it needs to be seen whether he can achieve his "agenda" or gets lost in the saffronised power. Mufti has taken this step thereby ignoring the resentment that has mainly poured within the Kashmir valley and through social media and the columns in newspaper. The biggest one was a three-part commissioned article in a local newspaper that tore him (Mufti) and his decision of joining BJP apart. Those who met Mufti informally and formally also expressed apprehensions and reservation of

facilitating an entry to a party that talks about absurdities such as Ghar Wapsi.

He still went ahead and gave enough time not only to people to give vent to their outburst but also sent feelers that he would not compromise and was ready to sit outside the power structure. Surprisingly he did not make the development an agenda, but his game of nerves revolved round the political concessions which would never be a case with any other state in India when it comes to stitching a coalition government. From the demand of resumption of dialogue with Pakistan to keeping Article 370 off the table, withdrawing Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), return of power projects and other issues, he made a bid to give the bargain a political colour. Now that both parties have found a “common ground”, it remains to be seen who has mellowed down on the conditions .

Despite the pressure from RSS, it may not be hard for BJP to accept the demands, which in any case are to make conducive conditions in Kashmir, but the way it won the elections on the slogans of West Pakistan refugee settlement and other issues it became critical vis-à-vis Kashmir, its credibility among the voters is at stake.

All said and done, the gamble is of Mufti than that of BJP. One argument that Mufti has repeated in a series of interviews given to some prominent Indian journalists (here he followed Omar Abdullah by choosing Delhi journalists over locals) is about taking Jammu along. He argues that he is conscious of the division that has become “official” after the election results and he wanted to reinvigorate the regional integration. If this is the only reason then what would be his takeaway for the Kashmiri population that has given him the mandate to rule.

What is important is the fact if Mufti can trust Delhi in conceding his demands not in three but let us say in next six years. One thing is clear, when it comes to Kashmir, that it is the establishment and not a political dispensation, which has more weight, and in last 67 years the mindset of policy makers has refused to change vis-à-vis Kashmir. Even if the assurances are written, the biggest test for Mufti would be to get them implemented in a time frame and prove Kashmiris wrong in saying that he did a sell out. Moreover, his oft repeated concern about Jammu isolation also needs to be seen in a background. In the past Kashmiri say Muslim leaders have tried their best to win over them. Ghulam Nabi Azad did

everything to appease the Hindus of Jammu during his tenure as Chief Minister telling them that he was the first from the region to lead the government. He did many practical things to change the face of Jammu but have a look at his humiliating defeat not only in the parliament election when he stood from Udhampur but the decimation he saw in his home turf in Chenab valley. When Farooq Abdullah came to power in 1996, he did the same thing – when it came to naming the Tawi bridge after Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, Jammu resented and Farooq's government had to impose virtual curfew to inaugurate it.

There are lessons for Mufti on this. He may be a shrewd and astute politician who knows his game well, but will Jammu trust him as an " Indian by conviction" (his own assertion) and does not upset his government with petty issues. He knows it well how Congress ministers turned his three years of rule (2003-05) into nightmare. By placing the alliance mainly on concern for Jammu and for achieving political gains for Kashmir, Mufti has headed for a big political gamble. Will he tame Modi to achieve his goal or gets reduced as a political cannon used by Delhi remains to be seen in a few years to come.

Politicisation over return of Kashmiri Pandits, June 2016

Last week, prominent Kashmiri journalist and Group Editor of Hyderabad based ETV, Rajesh Raina posted a video on his Facebook account that went viral. The moving video showed an elderly Kashmiri Abdur Razak Wagey of Kokernag returning Rs 80 to Rajesh's wife which he had borrowed from her father Som Nath Koul well before the latter's migration in 1990. He saw the lady for the first time and made desperate attempts to make her accept the money. She broke down and refused. Razak also offered her to return to her native home along with the family saying "our doors are open for you". This was not merely an encounter of erstwhile neighbours but relayed a story full of emotions that perhaps was being overshadowed with the crafted discourse over the return of Kashmiri Pandits to Valley. The video was so popular attracting emotional comments that it had already crossed 2.5 lakh views.

Back in Srinagar, Delhi and Jammu, the issue about return of Kashmiri Pandits has again dominated the political discussions. During her reply to

Governor's address in the Assembly on May 28, Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti made a confident statement saying that she would bring back Pandits while being in power. She also courted a controversy by citing the "pigeon and cat" analogy but was firm in saying that the situation for overall assimilation of KPs back in their old homes was not possible for now. In other words, she said there has to be separate accommodation for them and according to her "as soon as the situation improves they can go back to their homes". Mehbooba did not use the word "composite townships", but maintained that these would be transit accommodations.

However, the fact is that Government of India has repeatedly referred to this arrangement as "composite townships". In all the replies in parliament and also in the communication to the state government it is about the land to be identified for the separate townships. It all started on April 7, 2015 when Press Information Bureau, the agency responsible for handling central government's media, quoted the then Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed as assuring the Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh that land will be identified for these composite townships. Though the state government clarified it, GoI continued with the same discourse. And in her reply in the assembly also, Mehbooba did not categorically deny the concept of "composite townships". While the government has from time to time reiterated that these composite townships would not be confined to Kashmiri Pandits only, Panun Kashmir, the prominent body of KP's, has outrightly rejected the theory of "co-existence" and called for separate homeland.

The composite township also does not figure in the "Agenda of Alliance" between the PDP and BJP, which Mehbooba repeatedly swore by during her speech. Look at what AoA says about return of KP's– "Protecting and fostering ethnic and religious diversity by ensuring return of Kashmiri Pandits with dignity based on their rights as state subjects and reintegrating as well as absorbing them in the Kashmiri milieu. Reintegration will be a process that will start within the state as well as the civil society by taking the community into confidence". As far as the wording is concerned, it is straight and unambiguous. It does not talk about any township whether composite or separate. Surely a process has to be followed.

Even if it is only about transit accommodation and not composite townships, it has already led to divisions in the communities and the

political parties across the state. Without really going into how KPs can return to valley, the issue is being used for settling political scores. Government may construct more transit accommodations but it has not really worked in the past. All the efforts to lure Kashmiri Pandits back with doles in the past did not work.

The previous government constructed safe colonies for them in places like Sheikhpora and Vessu and provided out-of-turn jobs to more than 4,000 girls and boys, but it did not work the way it should have. Only last week, the government promised 4000 more jobs to them with an additional bonus of helping to create employment for 6000 more but will it make the difference. Many of those who got jobs in the past returned to Jammu and Delhi. Many Kashmiri Pandits are not ready to leave lucrative jobs within India and outside to return to Kashmir. Who will guarantee their security when the government stands even on Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which draws inspiration from the fact that the “situation is not conducive for that”?

While separatists have every right to articulate their viewpoint, they too have failed to contribute to any workable solution. How many times have they reached out to the community with a solution outside the government purview? By taking a particular stance, they are not helping build an understanding based on logic and practicality. They are stakeholders in the process of resolution of Kashmir of which the issue of Kashmiri Pandits is a part, but the last 25 years have showed that they lack direction. The issue of return of Pandits has to be seen in the context of an approach to the larger political issue. At the time New Delhi does not care about what is happening on ground in Kashmir. Raising such issues in isolation has the potential to aggravate the situation.

Going back to the video that suggested a different rather non-controversial aspect of relationship between the communities, such incidents even, if in small numbers, must be taken as a starting point for taking a process forward. Despite the differences and the divide the relationships between the two communities in past over a decade have improved. It is important that the civil society on both sides are made stake holders of a process that could pave way for their gradual return. One thing must be kept in mind that Kashmiri Pandits should come back to their homes not just to Kashmir. It should not be used to send a message to the majority community that

“Pandits have re-conquered their land”. It is not about land but about a displaced community that has lost its sense of existence. They have a right to return but not as agents of one government or the other but as part of the larger Kashmir that was known for tolerance, amity and brotherhood. Both communities will have to play a constructive role in that. And surely the separate or even “composite” townships are not an answer to the problem.

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